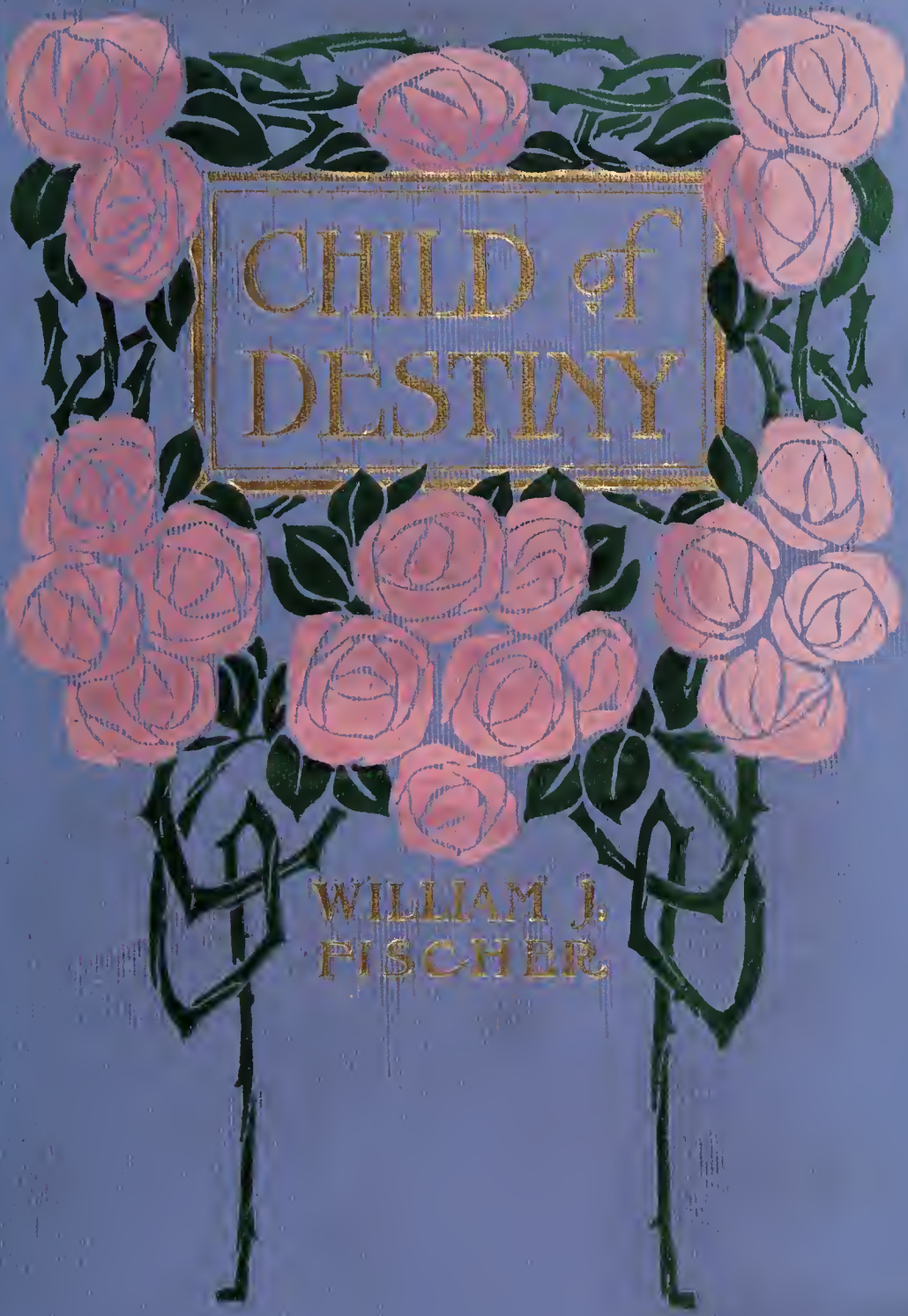
CHILD of DESTINY
WILLIAM J. FISCHER

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Child of Destiny

BY

WILLIAM J. FISCHER

AUTHOR OF

"SONGS BY THE WAYSIDE," "WINONA AND OTHER STORIES,"
"THE YEARS BETWEEN," "THE TOILER
AND OTHER POEMS" ETC.

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CHILD OF DESTINY

CHAPTER I.

The Gravenors.

"Life? 'Tis the story of love and of troubles,
Of troubles and love, that travel together
The round world through."

—*Joaquin Miller.*

BLEUR HOUSE, the magnificent home of the Gravenors, stood in the very heart of Kempton, under the sheltering shade of several oaks, surrounded by well-kept lawns, its massive white front facing one of the loveliest residential streets in the city. The estate was the especial delight of the good people of Kempton. On the spacious lawns the choicest flower-beds were to be found all the summer through, creations of brightness and beauty so artistically arranged by a genius, the trusty old gardener, Matt Pensy. Several paths led from the street to a marble fountain in the centre of the lawn, and here the men and women and the children often came to quench their thirst. In the rear of the house

stood the conservatory, filled with the rarest plants all the year round, and not far off a well-kept flower-garden smiled pleasantly to the passer-by.

When William Gravenor first came to Kempton, in the thirties, all the place could boast of was ten houses, a tavern, a grocery store and a blacksmith shop. The village was a little child out of its cradle just then, learning to crawl up the hill upon which the future city was to rise. All about Kempton was God's own treasure-trove, thousands and thousands of acres of rich timber land. On all sides mighty forest trees lifted their sun-kissed, kingly heads to the clouds. One night William Gravenor dreamed a beautiful dream, full of hope and promise. He dreamt he saw men at work at Kempton building a large lumber mill; others were busy cutting down the grand old trees in the woods. The lusty, vigorous song of the lumberman was music to his ears. Then the smoke from the lumberman's shanty rose snake-like to the skies, and all this filled his heart with joy. He saw men on their rafts in the rivers and the lakes, and the thousands of logs floating lazily down to the mill at Kempton. Very soon new families poured into the village, and countless buildings sprang up over night almost. The streets were filled with the sound of traffic and cars; hundreds of tall chimney shafts

pointed heavenwards; there was a boom, and in a very short time Kempton threw off its childhood's clothes and donned the garments of a vital, progressive manhood.

It was only a dream, but it set young Gravenor's brain a-thinking. He was a poor man, just newly married, come to Kempton to gain a livelihood for himself and his charming young wife, but he was shrewd, manly, full of business tact, and had two strong arms that were ready to do their share in the strenuous battle for existence. Here was the chance of a lifetime, and one morning William with several others began to dig the foundation for his intended lumber mill. A few years passed, the project grew, and very soon the young lumber-king was making piles of gold out of those very sawlogs that floated carelessly down the river in the fall.

Years passed, happy, fruitful years for the Gravenors. God gave them two children, Muriel and Arthur, who brought much sunshine into those early days. It was during this time of prosperity that Bleur House was built, but Mrs. Gravenor did not live long to enjoy it. When life held out its most precious treasures to her, it was then God called her home. Fifteen years later the same message came to the lumber-king. He had lived a good life; he had given freely of his money towards charity to lighten countless heavy

burdens—and he had nothing to fear from the Prince of Peace. And thus the Gravenor millions fell into the hands of the two children —Muriel and Arthur—who, together with old Aunt Hawkins, the trusty nurse, and Matt Pensy, the gardener, and several maids, constituted the Gravenor household at the time when this story opens. Arthur was then a handsome young man of twenty-eight, and Muriel a shy girl of seventeen.

One afternoon in late July, when Nature looked its loveliest, Aunt Hawkins hied away to a cool spot under the trees in the garden. A wave of heat had suddenly swept over Kempton, but it was not to last very long, for a cool wind was creeping up stealthily from the lake through the not far-distant cedars and hemlocks. The heart of the old nurse beat joyously as she seated herself on the mossy bench which was her favorite resting-place. She was a short, plump, good-looking woman, with a perfectly round, fat face. Her hair was a soft, silky white, and, though she was well up in years, not a wrinkle was visible on her pleasant face. But the years were beginning to manifest themselves in her gait. She moved with difficulty, and her hands were already showing the tremor of age. Yet withal she was good to look at as she sat there in her neat, plain, gray dress and white apron, a favorite volume of Dickens in

her hand. There was a quaint, old-time comfortableness about her that was not at all unpleasing. These afternoon reading hours, out in the open, were her special delight. She was not an intellectual woman, but she was schooled in the philosophy of good living, and, had it not been for her coming into the Gravenor household, things would have gone hard with the two small children when they became orphans. When Muriel was but a child and Mrs. Gravenor's life hung merely by a thread, the frail little woman pressed Aunt Hawkins' hand and, with tears in her eyes, begged her to take care of her two little ones. And when, fifteen years later, the father felt that he was also to be taken away, his last words were: "Auntie! be good to the children. It breaks my heart to leave them. Continue to be a mother to them, for they have only you now." And the good woman fulfilled her promise. She guarded them as jealously as a bird would its young. They looked up to her in all things. She was a second mother to them in every sense. Mrs. Gravenor herself had christened the matronly, tender-hearted woman "Aunt," and thus she was called by all who knew her intimately.

Muriel, unknown to Aunt Hawkins, had stolen into the garden some minutes previously. She loved to be out there amongst the flowers. They were like so many com-

panions—playmates to her, in their many-colored dresses. Roses, dahlias, portulaccas, nasturtiums and marigolds smiled everywhere. That afternoon she had asked Matt if she might not gather a few roses for Aunt Hawkins, as it was her birthday.

"And how old, pray, is the aunt to-day?" Matt asked inquisitively.

"Sixty years, Matt," the girl answered gently.

"So, so—sixty years! Well! well! I would hardly believe it. She is pretty spry for an old woman," he added. "Ah, but she's a good soul, she is. When first I came here, about thirty years or so ago, she was a fine young woman then, but she had a broken heart an' I couldn't help pityin' her. Your father, girl, kind man that he was, took her in a few weeks before I came."

"Aunt Hawkins had a broken heart, Matt? What do you mean?" asked Muriel.

"Ah! 'tis a long, long story," the old gardener answered thoughtfully. "I cannot tell it to you now. Sometime you shall hear it all."

"Very well. You must not forget to tell me, for I never knew that Aunt Hawkins' young life had been so sad."

"No, I shall not forget, Muriel," he said as he turned down the narrow pathway that led to the street.

"Matt! Matt!" cried the girl, loudly. "What about the roses?"

The gardener turned with a pleasant smile on his face.

"Pluck all you want, darling," he answered tenderly. "The reds are the prettiest, but they're not half nice enough for you or Aunt Hawkins."

A few moments later Muriel was busy in the garden, and, as she bent over cutting the rose stems, a little sigh escaped her lips.

"Poor things!" she murmured. "I wonder if the other roses will miss them."

She gathered the flowers together in her arms, and, as she turned to leave the garden, the sunlight stole silently over her face, sweet in its girlishness, and for a moment made it more lovely. God had given Muriel rare beauty of form and face. In her plain white dress, the cluster of red roses nestling sweetly against her breast, she appeared very beautiful. Aunt Hawkins always said that she resembled her mother. She had her fine, creamy complexion, her deep black hair, the same small, delicate nose and the blood-red lips.

Gently she glided down between the stately rows of hollyhocks, with their satin crimson and lavender hoods, humming a favorite song. Presently she reached the garden gate. Then she espied Aunt Hawkins on her favorite

bench not many yards away. The old woman had her back turned. Slowly and noiselessly she tiptoed up behind her, then threw her arms about her neck and kissed her tenderly.

Mrs. Hawkins had been so wrapped up in her book that she had not heard Muriel's footsteps.

"Goodness gracious, child! You frightened me," shrieked the woman.

"Never mind, auntie," the girl interposed. "The situation was really too tempting."

Muriel could not restrain her laughter, and in a moment the dear old aunt joined in with her.

"But come, let's be friends again," whispered the girl as she put her arms about her a second time.

"Where do all the pretty roses come from, Muriel?" Mrs. Hawkins asked.

"From the garden, to be sure. You see, I did not forget that this is your birthday, so Matt gave me permission to pluck the prettiest ones for you. May many more birthdays gladden your heart," the girl said with feeling as she handed her the fragrant flowers.

"Thank you, child! It is all very thoughtful of you and I appreciate your kind words. But alas! I am afraid I have seen most of my birthdays. The summer of life has passed over me, the autumn is now here, and soon it will be winter. Yes, darling, soon it will—."

She did not finish the sentence. Her voice seemed to choke her.

"Ah, you seem to be sad, auntie. I do not like to see you in such spirits."

"Some day, child, when you are older, you too, as I, will look down the lone pathway of the years, with mingled feelings of pleasure and pain, upon those things, large and small, which at one time or other entered so largely into your life. Besides—"

There was a momentary pause. The woman toyed nervously through the pages of her book while Muriel seated herself upon the grass at her feet. Then, in a voice trembling with emotion, she began:

"You have never heard the story of my younger life. Have you not often wondered how I came into your household?"

"Yes, often, auntie. It has been a puzzle to me. But at last I got to thinking that you had been here always."

"Ah, no, child. 'Tis a long and sad story —but I had better not tell you."

"Oh, do tell me, auntie! Pray, do tell me!"

"Since you wish to know then, I shall."

The kind woman closed the book on her lap, readjusted her eyeglasses and then proceeded.

"It is now thirty years since that awful night out in the woods. I remember it all so

well. It was a clear, fresh night in summer. We had been married three months. Dave was a good man, and I loved him tenderly, loved him with a love that was strong and all-consuming. That night I waited long for him in the little log shanty down by the hill. The evening meal was ready—and he did not come. My heart had strange misgivings, but I trusted in God. The clock struck seven—eight. Another half hour ebbed away slowly. I grew desperate. Presently there was a rap at the door. The door flew open, and there stood your father.

"'I come to bring you no good news, Mrs. Hawkins,' said he. 'Hurry! Dave is dying.'

"'Dave dying—great God!' I cried. 'What has happened?'

"'The poor fellow was on his way home this evening when a hungry wolf attacked him. He was defenceless, but he fought and struggled with his hands until he choked the animal to death. The wolf, however, inflicted dangerous wounds in the death struggle, and Dave has lost so much blood that he cannot live much longer.'

"'Where is he?' I cried despairingly.

"'Down in the forest, near the bend in the river. The night watchman came across him accidentally a half hour ago.'

"'Why did they not bring him home?' I asked.

"'He is too weak,' said your father. 'The doctor would not allow him to be moved.'

"'Then he is dying! Perhaps he is dead now.'

"'No,' replied your father, 'I am sure you will still find him alive. But come, let us go!"

"Quickly we hurried to the spot, your father and I. The earth seemed to reel before me. When I reached him Dave raised his head and smiled gently. 'I am so glad you came. I am dying—take my hand,' was all he said. His life hung by the merest thread. Another minute and the struggle was over. That very evening your father took me to Bleur House. My heart was broken, but I found friends in your dear parents. They sympathized with me, and in time my suffering became less acute. Bleur House was to be my home forever, they said, and I was glad. Then Arthur came into the world and I nursed him through childhood, and some years later your precious self, Muriel, was entrusted to me. You see, then, child, I have remained with you both until now. I loved your parents. They were good to me, and for their sake and yours I hope to remain with you until I die."

"Oh, I am so glad to hear that you intend remaining here always," joyfully cried Muriel, "and, though your early years experienced such great sorrows, I know that

Arthur and I shall take good care that your last days shall be full of happiness. But see! there comes Matt. He seems to be worried about something."

The faithful gardener was walking rather briskly up the narrow path when Muriel summoned him.

"Come over here, Matt!"

In a moment Matt joined them. Like Aunt Hawkins, he also was well up in years, and as he stood there he looked the picture of simpleness and good cheer. He was a tall, very thin man. A large straw hat covered his bald head, and his tanned face was all wrinkles. He had no moustache, but a long gray beard showed conspicuously, hiding a rather gaudy red necktie which had undoubtedly done veteran service for many years. His arms were bare to the elbow. They were strong and very brown. Plain blue overalls covered a pair of trousers rather short in the extremities. Matt Pensy was a very plain, ordinary-looking man, but he had more heart and love for his fellowmen than many a city millionaire. Yet he was rather simple in many ways. He knew absolutely nothing about the world outside of Bleur House. For years he had attended to the gardening about the place, and people admitted that he was an expert at this sort of business. He could talk for hours about plant life and its many inter-

esting details, but when one brought up a topic of the day for discussion, Matt Pensy would only shrug his shoulders and walk away in disgust.

"What is the matter, Matt?" asked Muriel, noticing the sour look on the gardener's face. "You do not look well. Are you sick?"

"Not exactly," he remarked glumly. "You see I did not feel well when I left you an hour ago, Muriel, so I went to the doctor. He felt me pulse, looked at me tongue, gave me some medicine that almost turned me insides out, an' charged me a dollar for all me trouble. By jiminy! that's enough to put anybody out of humor, I think."

"Is that all he did?" asked Mrs. Hawkins. "Did you not receive any medicine, any liquid, powders or pills?"

"To be sure he gave me some stuff to drink —two doses, I believe. He called it some fancy, highfalutin' name. Just a minute. I'll have it in a second. Ah, yes! em-etic, or some other such sounding thing. Emetic, yes —that's the word."

"I thought he would not let you go without giving you some medicine," remarked Muriel.

"Medicine!" he retorted angrily. "Why, what good was the concoction to me anyway? Sure, I could not hold it on me stomach at all, at all. And to think he had the nerve to

charge me a dollar for it when it wouldn't even stay down five minutes!"

The two women at once took in the situation. Matt, poor fellow, could not imagine what they were laughing at. The sound of their voices irritated him, and he stood for a moment gazing about in strange bewilderment. Then he turned away abruptly.

"Poor Matt! simple as he is, he has really a heart of gold," remarked Muriel.

"I am afraid we hurt his feelings," exclaimed Mrs. Hawkins. "He did look so pitiful when we laughed. It was positively rude, Muriel. I feel quite sorry for it all."

Just then a voice sounded from the garden —a thin, weak voice, tuned to some melody, tender and soothing. It was Matt's. He was busy at work amongst his flowers, in his little world that was filled with beauty. Presently a lonely thrush joined in the old man's song in sweet accompaniment.

"Matt is singing, auntie," whispered Muriel. "Listen! The poor soul seems to have forgotten the sting of our outburst of laughter."

It was a touching, plaintive strain, and the two women could not help listening to the pleading voices of man and bird, that floated over the fragrant rosebushes and the stately rows of tall hollyhocks.

CHAPTER II.

The Mysterious Letter.

"Here are a few of the unpleasantest words
That ever blotted paper."

—*Shakespeare.*

THE little canary warbled cheerfully in the library as Aunt Hawkins rose from her chair to stir the fire in the grate. It was a cold evening without. The winds were blowing wildly over the hills—rather an unexpected change from the warm, peaceful afternoon. The skies were filled with gray clouds, and, here and there in the blue, the tranquil stars could be seen sentinelling the glad hours of approaching night.

Aunt Hawkins felt rather chilly as she sat near the table sewing. In her hurry to finish her little task she had forgotten to add more fuel to the fire. A few feet away, book in hand, sat Muriel, dreaming of the little silken-haired heroine whose stormy career she was following through the interesting chapters.

The library was the most inviting room in Bleur House. On the three sides of the room stood rows of bookshelves, filled with the volumes that William Gravenor had collected in his lifetime. On the other side two large windows looked out into the

moonlit night. The heavy damask curtains were only half drawn. Two large palms stood on pedestals near the pleasant windows. The floor was covered by a Turkish rug, and from the ceiling a heavy glass chandelier hung, full of many sparkling lights. Over the large arched doorway that led into the drawing-room were two costly paintings in oil—likenesses of the former owner of Bleur House and his charming wife. Marble busts were on the bookshelves. Upon the table in the middle of the room stood the bouquet of roses which Muriel had given Aunt Hawkins in the afternoon, and a bowl in which three or four pretty goldfish were swimming.

Just as Aunt Hawkins had seated herself after attending to the fire, there was a rap at the door. Turning, she beheld Kitty, the maid, in her nicely starched white cap and apron, a small silver card tray in her hand.

"Pray, ma'am, pardon my interrupting, but someone just this minute left this note at the door and bade me deliver it posthaste to Mr. Arthur."

"Arthur has not returned, but I shall see that the note is handed him, Kitty."

Mrs. Hawkins took the proffered envelope. It bore a woman's handwriting.

"And do you suppose, ma'am, that Arthur will be in for dinner this evening? It is getting late and—and—" Kitty bit her lips ner-

vously and blushed visibly. "I would like to know, for you see, ma'am, Silas promised to take me to the theatre to-night, and I would not like to disappoint him for all the world."

"And Silas Butterworth shall not be disappointed, Kitty," answered Aunt Hawkins. "It would be a pity to have Silas drive in from the country for nothing—so just hurry upstairs and put on your best clothes. Muriel and I will see that Arthur is well cared for."

"A thousand thanks, ma'am!" said Kitty. "Silas and I are engaged, you know, but that is miles from being married, eh? Kitty Frederick isn't in such a hurry to change her name to Butterworth, you may depend upon it, ma'am."

Just then Kitty heard footsteps outside. "Ah! I'm sure that's Silas!" And in a second she disappeared from the room.

"Kitty is a good girl, auntie," remarked Muriel, looking up from her book. "I do hope she will not think of marrying Silas Butterworth for a long time yet."

"And so do I," interrupted Mrs. Hawkins. "It would be very difficult to replace her."

Presently the old family clock in the hall struck eight. The house was very quiet. The sound of the clock had the slightest touch of melancholy in it.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Muriel, "eight o'clock, and Arthur not home yet!"

"He is likely busy at the mill. This is the last day of the month, you know, Muriel."

"But I am sure he is not at the mill at this hour. You know, auntie, he went fishing this afternoon with a few of his friends."

"I did not know that," answered Mrs. Hawkins. "By the way, Muriel, have you not noticed that Arthur has been acting strangely of late? He is not the same as he used to be."

"Yes, I have noticed it. The bright smile and cheerful laugh seem to have left him. He always looks so worried. His mind seems to be wrestling with some problem. Only yesterday I found him sitting here in the library gazing into space. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear me enter the room. And then I always see such deep lines of sadness in his face. I wonder what can be the matter?"

"I have no idea, Muriel. Do you think he might be worrying over business affairs?"

"I hardly think so. Only last week he told me that everything was running smoothly at the mill."

Presently a light dawned on Mrs Hawkins' mind, and her thoughts stole swiftly to the mysterious letter which Kitty had handed her but a few minutes before.

"Muriel, come here," she said. "Let us examine this letter. It seems strange that it should have been brought here this evening.

The postman never makes his rounds as late as this. How stupid of me not to have asked Kitty who handed her the letter."

"It all seems very strange to me," ventured Muriel. "See! the address shows a woman's handwriting. Who could it be from?"

That very moment the front door opened, and there were sounds of footsteps in the hall. Arthur appeared in the doorway, his face showing a faint smile.

"At last! at last!" joyfully exclaimed Muriel as she ran across the room to embrace him. "Really, Arthur, I thought you were never coming. Auntie and I have been picturing all manner of things for the last half hour or so."

"That is really too bad, and I am sorry you worried so about me, little pet," he said tenderly as he seated himself near the fire. "This is a cold night, and I am nearly frozen. We would have been back hours ago, but we took a canoe and paddled up the river, and, before we knew it, were miles away from home."

"Was the fishing good, Arthur?" questioned Muriel, eagerly.

"Yes, very. It was fine sport. It would have filled old Izaak Walton's heart with joy. I caught a great many fish, but I sent them to the homes of the poor people of Kempton."

"You must be hungry," interrupted Mrs.

Hawkins. "Dinner has been ready a long time. Come Muriel! come, Arthur!" And she led the way to the dining-room.

"By the way, Arthur," she remarked, "just a minute." She turned and walked over to the table and took up the strange letter. "Someone left this at the door for you this evening," she continued. "I almost forgot to hand it to you."

Arthur looked at the address. He recognized the handwriting at once, and a shadow crept over his handsome face. Quickly he walked over to the light, opened the envelope and eagerly read the contents.

Arthur Gravenor looked the picture of strong, athletic manhood as his eyes scanned the lines hurriedly. He wore a plain tweed suit of gray. His face was clean-shaven, fair complexioned, and, withal, good to look upon. Yet the color was fading quickly from the glowing cheeks. His perfect row of white teeth met for an instant, then he bit his lip. A strange look came into his eyes, and a heavy sigh escaped him. He whispered a few words under his breath, but the two women did not understand him.

Muriel grew frightened.

"What's the matter, Arthur?" she said uneasily. "That letter seems to have brought you distressing news."

"No, no, Muriel. Just as I read it a faint,

sickening feeling stole over me and almost overpowered me. But I have been so long without my dinner. I think that is probably the cause."

"Then, come, Arthur, you shall not wait another minute," remarked Muriel.

Arthur stepped hastily to the fireplace, tore the mysterious letter and threw it into the flames. Some of the fragments, however, fell to the tiled floor in front of the grate. He did not notice them. He was too excited. Just then his thoughts were with the writer of the letter. Muriel, however, saw the few white scraps lying around and decided that she would gather them at the first opportune moment.

Arthur sat at table that evening, but he ate very little. For the last four years the management of the extensive lumber business had fallen to his lot, and it was only natural to expect that there were many worries in connection with it for a young man of twenty-eight. After dinner he lit a cigar. He tried to smile, but it was a strange smile, such as Muriel had never seen before. She did not like her brother's actions at all.

"I am going out for a while this evening," he said to her. "I have some little business matters to attend to. Now be a good girl and do not worry about me."

"How can I help it, Arthur? You know

you are all I have in this world, and—" Then the tears came to her eyes.

A feeling of pity stole into Arthur's heart, and he drew her to his breast, kissing her forehead tenderly.

"There, little angel, do not cry any more!" he said with emotion. "I must away now. I will be back soon."

"This mysterious letter was not a good omen," Muriel said to Mrs. Hawkins as she entered the room. "It contained bad news. I could read it plainly in Arthur's eyes. A change is coming over my brother. What can it all mean?"

Thereupon she went to the fireplace and picked up the torn fragments of the letter. There were eight or ten pieces. Lifting them to the light, she approached the table and remarked: "I wonder, auntie, if these will give us a clue. They are pretty small, but perhaps we may be able to discover the writer."

Nervously the girl's eyes followed the words on the little white fragments.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "here's the name of the writer—Mazie Rawlins! Good heavens! Mazie Rawlins, the poor widow's daughter on Shelbourne avenue—"

"What dealings can this girl have with Arthur?" asked Mrs. Hawkins.

"Ah, I see it all," cried Muriel, her face

white with excitement. "On the slips I can decipher two phrases—'You torture me' and 'I do not love you.'"

The girl sighed deeply.

"Oh, I see it all," she continued. "Arthur is in love with Mazie Rawlins. He is going to her to-night. I'll follow him and see what it is all about. There is not a moment to be lost."

"Muriel, it is getting late. Are you not afraid?" asked Mrs. Hawkins, anxiously.

"Afraid? No, auntie. There is something wrong somewhere, and I will find out the cause. Poor Arthur! He has been acting strangely. I see it all now, and my heart breaks for him. The black cloak, auntie—quick! I must go. Arthur, I am sure, is only a block ahead by now."

"I fear for your safety, child."

"Do not worry about me. Something tells me I must go, and go at once."

Muriel threw the black-hooded cloak over her shoulders and was off in a minute.

"Good-bye, auntie," she said. "Don't worry about me."

In a moment she was in the street, hurrying on as fast as her feet could carry her in the direction of Shelbourne avenue. But there was no sight of Arthur in the throngs that passed her. Hoping to save time she entered the city park. The band was just then play-

ing a pleasant waltz, full of dash and vigor. But the music did not appeal to her. In her present state of mind it only bored her. The windstorm had abated. Only a cool breeze lingered, sighing through the trees.

In half an hour Muriel reached Shelbourne avenue. The quaint little cottage of Grandma Rawlins stood but a few blocks away. In the distance she could see a pale light flickering in one of the windows. The name of Grandma Rawlins was well known in the city. She came to Kempton in her girlhood and grew old with the place. She was blind, and God also took away from her the gift of hearing. Blessed with three sons, Mazie, the youngest child, was all that remained now. The others were sleeping the last, long, eternal sleep in different parts of the world. Fate had separated them in early years, and God willed they should never meet in this life again.

Grandma Rawlins, however, was well taken care of. Mazie tended and watched her carefully. Poor, frail little woman, nestling sweetly in her neat, white bed—it was well that God had given her so good, so noble a daughter. Angels could not have made her last years pleasanter. The touch of Mazie's warm hand and the press of her red cheek were the gifts of life the old mother prized deeply.

Mazie Rawlins was a good-hearted woman.

In order to make a living for herself she gave music lessons to a small number of pupils. Her constant devotion to her infirm mother did not allow her much time. Her income was little enough, but by careful saving she managed year by year to make ends meet. She played the piano remarkably well, and deserved a hearing from the musical world. In the years back she had been a great friend of Signor Fastini, whose studio had stood just across the street from her mother's cottage. She had been a bright little girl and had shown decided talent, so the Signor took her in, and in time she developed into one of his best pianists. She was destined to carve a name for herself, but the ties of home bound her fast, and she sacrificed the concert platform in order to care for her poor old mother. In her heart she deemed it her duty to do so.

When Muriel reached the Rawlins cottage the sound of music floated into the desolate street. Quickly she tiptoed across the lawn and hid behind the large rosebush that stood in front of the half-open cottage window. A soothing Mendelssohn aria was just then stealing from the room. Muriel recognized it. The music recalled tender memories. She pressed closer to the window and gazed into the plain little cottage. Mazie Rawlins sat at the piano. Her fingers moved slowly over the keys, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

"How pretty she looks!" Muriel whispered. "Poor woman! But where is Arthur? Perhaps after all I am on the wrong track. I shall wait a few minutes."

The minutes hung like heavy, leaden hours upon Muriel's heart. "I wonder what it all means," she mused. "Why should Mazie write my brother a letter?"

Just then footsteps sounded on the pavement. They were coming nearer and nearer. A man passed by hurriedly. Another minute, and there was a rap at the door of the Rawlins cottage.

Muriel raised herself full length before the window. Every nerve in her body tingled. Her breath came quickly as her eyes stared into the cosy little room.

Mazie ceased playing. Like a frightened bird, she rose and turned towards the door. There was just the faintest smile on her lips. She halted for a moment. Her plain black gown hung gracefully from her shoulders. She looked very pretty. The sudden excitement had brought the color to her cheeks. Her soft, bright eyes had a dreamy look in them as she toyed nervously with the little golden necklace round her throat. But it was only for an instant. Then the door opened quickly and the man entered.

"It is Arthur. I'll remain here quietly and listen," whispered Muriel to herself.

CHAPTER III.

Rosemary and Rue.

"Oh! that a dream so sweet, so long enjoy'd,
Should be so sadly, cruelly destroyed!"

—*Moore.*

SOMEWHAT nervously, Muriel moved a little closer to the window.

"Good evening, Mazie," said Arthur, with brevity.

"Miss Rawlins, if you please, sir," interrupted Mazie, indignantly.

"Good evening, Miss Rawlins, then"—and Arthur bowed gallantly. "I see you are not pleased," he continued, "that I called this evening, but I shall, nevertheless, make bold enough to offer myself a seat."

Rather unconcerned, Arthur sank into a comfortable armchair near by.

Mazie's face flushed crimson. Every drop of blood seemed to have rushed to her cheeks. She raised her flashing eyes to his and said: "Arthur Gravenor, who invited you to come here this evening?"

"Nobody in particular. I invited myself."

"People often put in appearance when they are least wanted," the woman interrupted hotly.

Arthur laughed a cold, sarcastic laugh which grated terribly on Mazie's ears.

"Won't you be seated?" asked Arthur, pointing to a chair.

"No! All I have to say I prefer saying standing."

"Well, then, let us understand each other. You were kind enough to address a letter to Bleur House—"

"Yes, and in view of it," she interrupted, "I am rather surprised to see you here this evening."

"Ah, those were cruel lines you wrote, Mazie. You must know that my heart had always dreamed of possessing you. It was a foolish dream, perhaps, but I could not help it. And now comes your strange letter. Oh, those were cruel, heartless lines you wrote, Mazie!"

"Perhaps they were, Mr. Gravenor—"

"Oh, do not say Mr.! Call me Arthur—it hurts me. Oh, Mazie—Mazie!"

"Mr. Gravenor, I am sorry for your display of emotion," Miss Rawlins began slowly, after a moment's quiet, "but when you first made your advances I begged of you, nay, implored you, to turn your love into other channels, for mine was already promised to another."

"Lawrence Lescot! Curse him!" Arthur thought to himself.

"I begged of you," she pleaded, "to leave me in peace, but you persisted. And now

it has come to this. Mr. Gravenor, I love Lawrence Lescot, and I intend to marry him, so be a man and follow your own path in life, and leave me alone!"

She spoke in clear, decisive tones, and her words smote Gravenor's soul with subtle force. He loved Mazie madly, and it was with a pure, strong, abiding love. She was vivacious and beautiful, but God had willed that she was to be given to another. Lawrence was only a poor boy—one of the hands down in the Gravenor mill. Arthur met him almost daily, and hated him with a strong and deadly hatred. Jealousy often makes monsters out of angels, and the cunning viper was already beginning to tighten its deadly coils. Lawrence Lescot was to be married to the girl he loved. The thought was almost unbearable. Up to the present Arthur Gravenor's character had been above reproach, but God only knew where his misplaced love was yet to lead him.

For the next half hour Arthur pleaded strongly with the girl he loved, but Mazie met him each time with such an array of good, solid argument that even Muriel's heart went out to the woman in black, even though her brother's fate stood in the balance.

"What kind of a home can Lawrence Lescot give you, Mazie?" he asked, as he rose from his chair. "He is poor, and with his

few shillings a day he cannot do much for you. If you would consent to become my wife, a home even grander and more luxurious than Bleur House would be yours. You would have comforts in plenty. I would do everything to make you happy. Picture the hovel Lawrence Lescot will take you to, and then think of what I shall be proud to do for you."

"Mr. Gravenor, I care naught for your wealth or your promises!" Miss Rawlins said hotly. "Your gold is nothing to me so long as I possess the love of Lawrence Lescot, and I am willing to brave all storms and go to the distant ends of the earth with him, for I know that God will be with us."

"Foolish girl!"

"I am satisfied," she answered calmly, "to battle with any storm so long as Lawrence's strong arms are at the oars."

Arthur approached her, but she motioned him back.

"Go! go!" she cried, "let me alone!"

"I see then that no entreaty can move you, Miss Rawlins."

"None, Mr. Gravenor," she replied coldly. "I do not love you, never could love you, so I beg you in the name of God never to visit me again."

Arthur's eyes sank to the floor. In a moment he faced her again. His eyes now had

a deep, jealous passion in them and flashed wildly as a terrible curse fell from his lips.

Mazie trembled. Her face was almost bloodless.

"Go! go!" she cried.

"You will suffer for this some day. Remember! remember!" he said viciously.

A shudder ran through Muriel just then. "O God! preserve Arthur from harm!" she prayed. "He does not know what he is doing."

"Remember, Miss Rawlins—remember!" he almost hissed a second time.

A faint cry stole from the adjoining room. Grandma Rawlins was calling her daughter to her bedside.

Arthur left the room.

Mazie sank upon a couch near by and gave way to bitter tears. The struggle had been too much for her, and now the reaction came.

"Mazie! Mazie!" again sounded her mother's weak voice, and forthwith she hurried to her side.

When Arthur Gravenor entered the city park the moon was hidden by heavy clouds. Muriel had hurried on ahead, so that she would reach Bleur House before her brother. Arthur walked hurriedly down the small narrow path. Presently he halted for a moment. There were sounds of approaching footsteps.

In the glare of the electric light, some distance from him, he saw the figure of a man, pail in hand, walking briskly. In a few minutes they would meet face to face.

"I wonder if that is Lawrence Lescot," he thought. "It looks his size and sounds like his walk. One would expect to see him pass here about this time on his way home from the mill. I'll hide behind these bushes and wait."

The footsteps approached nearer. The moon emerged from out the darkness and bathed Kempton in the glory of soft, subdued light. From behind the bushes Arthur viewed the narrow pathway. The next moment the moonlight shone full upon the man's pleasant face. It was full of smiles. He was humming a song. His words sounded nearer and clearer—

> "You are the moon, dear love, and I the sea:
> The tides of hope swell high within my breast
> And hide—

"Lescot—the wretch!" groaned Arthur.

Just then hate, jealousy and despair almost robbed him of his senses. "I'll kill him! I'll kill him," he said to himself.

Nervously his hand sought the pistol in his pocket. It flashed silver in the moonlight. And crouching down, he waited breathlessly. Lawrence was now but a few yards away.

At that moment Muriel reached Bleur House. "God protect my poor brother from harm!" she pleaded as she closed the door. "He knows not what he is doing."

Lawrence Lescot passed slowly, on his lips the music of those tender words—

"You are the moon, dear love, and I the sea."

Arthur Gravenor's fingers were on his pistol. He tried to move the trigger, but they refused to obey his will. All control of them seemed gone. The next moment the pistol fell into the grass. He tried to speak, but his lips and tongue were dry and no sound came. Hurriedly he rose and stumbled home in the moonlight, his mind a prey to strange, bitter thoughts. His angel had heard Muriel's prayer and borne it to the great white Throne.

Lawrence Lescot did not know that a few minutes before he might have been swept out of existence forever by a deadly pistol shot. He hurried on gladly, his dinner-pail dangling musically on his arm. Presently he saw a flickering light at Mazie's window. His eyes sparkled, and there was a look of sweetness on his manly face as his thoughts stole to the little queen whom he worshipped. Since this bright angel had come into his life, his days had been one continued period of love and song. Life held forth far greater possibilities to him now that it was radiant with Mazie's

love. He was poor, but he had rich qualities of heart and mind that gold could never buy.

Soon he stood in front of the Rawlins cottage. It was late. What was he to do? At that moment he saw Mazie gliding through the room. Noiselessly he crept to the door. In a moment he stood in her presence, a strong, manly, lovable-looking fellow.

"Lawrence," whispered Mazie, "I am so glad you came."

"What has happened?" exclaimed he, greatly surprised at her worried appearance. "You look pale and troubled—and you have been crying? Poor little dear!"

He drew her into his strong arms and rested her head on his shoulder.

"What has happened, Mazie?"

"Oh, nothing much," she answered in trembling voice. "I am not feeling well. I have had very little sleep the last few nights. Mother has been so very restless."

"For your sake I am glad to hear that nothing has happened," he replied kindly.

Mazie's thoughts went back to that painful scene of half an hour ago, in which Arthur Gravenor had figured so conspicuously, but she brushed the picture aside hurriedly. She had made up her mind never to mention the matter to Lawrence.

When Arthur reached Bleur House the place was evidently wrapped in sleep. Muriel

upon her return had hurried to Aunt Hawkins' room and, in the extremity of her anguish, had poured out her heart to her.

"I feel sorry for Arthur," Mrs. Hawkins remarked, "but, Muriel, be careful not to mention the matter to him. If he knew that you tracked him to the place, he would never forgive you. He would hate you all his life for it."

That evening Muriel went to bed with a heavy heart and drifted into a nervous sleep.

Arthur, lest he might disturb the sleepers, tiptoed to his room across the hall. He did not turn on the light. The room was bathed in the moon's soft rays. One face looked out brighter than all the others on the wall. It was Mazie's. In a time of friendship she had given the picture to him. Long he stared at it. He felt sure he could never forget her. Love had set its tendrils too deeply into his heart, and he feared they would have to remain there always. He could not sleep. The past haunted him. He rose and opened the window. A wandering breeze swept in, cooling his face. Kempton slept peacefully. Afar off, the lakes flashed like sheets of molten glass beneath the starlit heavens. Now and then a bird voice sounded in the surrounding trees. It was like the cry of a soul lost forever in impenetrable darkness. Presently the clock in the cathedral tower chimed the

hour of midnight. Arthur sank into his chair and gazed for some time into the lonely night about him. His thoughts were still of Mazie.

Later a new light came to his eyes, and he whispered to the stars about him: "I will not trouble her any more. God! give me strength to do it, for in my heart I shall love her always! The old love can never die."

CHAPTER IV.

The Shadow Falls.

" One woe doth tread upon another's heel,
So fast they follow."

—*Shakespeare.*

MATT PENSY had risen with the birds, for he had a great many things to do that day. Dawn was just breaking when he rose from his bed and sleepily walked over to the window. The regal day was already donning his crimson garments. In the east the sun children were busy stirring their morning fires, for the skies were growing very bright. Those precious early moments were one continual rhapsody of bird music. Everywhere the melodies echoed. Everywhere voices trilled and executed their intricate cadenzas charmingly. The gates of heaven seemed to stand wide open as Matt gazed across the pleasant landscape. For some minutes he stood spellbound.

" Sure, this is a grand world to be in," he muttered to himself as he left the window, " and yet people are never satisfied. God gives them flowers, birds, an' sunshine in plenty. His fields yield them their daily food, an' yet they grumble and grumble. I

know I shall be very sorry when the call comes. It will be very hard to leave the big, wide, green earth."

A few minutes later Matt was busy at his work in his garden, his lips echoing the faintest words of a song. He always sang when the flowers began to come, but in the fall of the year when the place looked desolate and bare not a sound escaped his lips.

Before long the old gardener heard footsteps very near to him. Turning, he saw Arthur but a few feet away.

"The top o' the morning to you, Mister Arthur," he called briskly.

"Good morning, Matt. I am surprised to see you about."

"And I you. May I ask what brought you out of bed so early, Arthur?"

For a moment Arthur was perplexed. He had not been able to sleep, for reasons which the reader already knows, and had wandered out into the open air rather aimlessly, his mind in a state of deep unrest. Matt's question, therefore, rather puzzled him. He hardly knew how to answer it.

"Well," he declared, "I forgot to wind my watch last evening, and when I awoke this morning it pointed the hour of eight. When the cathedral chimes, however, pealed five, I noticed the mistake. So that explains my early appearance. But it is so very pleasant

out here I think I will remain. There's nothing like a good whiff of fresh air so early in the morning, eh, Matt?"

"A good whiff of fresh air an' a easy conscience," rejoined the gardener.

The words stung Arthur. His conscience was anything but easy at the moment, notwithstanding the resolution he had made.

"Be seated, Mister Arthur," said Matt, pointing to a bench facing him.

Presently the gardener raised himself from his knees and, leaning on his shovel, said: "By the way, Mister Arthur, I ha' somethin' to say to you, but you must not get angry at me for speakin' the truth."

"No, I shall not get angry. Go on!"

"Well, I was over at Meekin's grocery last night. It's a place the fellers come o' nights. They talk an' argue like a lot o' washerwomen an' then they fight like hyenas. Well, Bill Storms was there. Bill Storms, you know him—that big sort o' burly-lookin' chap.

"Oh, yes; Storms, the liveryman's son. Yes, I know him," interrupted Arthur.

"Well, we got to discussin' politics, an' then we drifted into a talk about the overly rich. Storms talked like a lawyer. He knew it all. He argued and fought with his tongue until his face got as red as a tomato. 'Down with the rich man! He is the bigges'

enemy o' the poor people,' he cried. Then he asked me for my opinion, but I said not a word. This made him angry. He did not like my silence, so he up an' says: 'There sits old, sleepy Matt Pensy over there, with his lips closed tight, afraid to say a word.' An' then later he up again an' says: 'I know now why he won't commit himself. He daren't say one word. The Arthur Gravenor he is working for is one of them "rusty cats."' My blood got boilin' hot. 'What did you say, Storms?' I cried. 'I said your master was one of them "rusty cats."' 'Take back those words, Bill Storms,' I cried as I rose from my chair, 'or I'll make you.' 'I'll take nothing back,' he snapped again. 'Gravenor's a "rusty cat." Isn't that so, Sims, Flare, Bates?' and he appealed to the other men. I jumped across the floor an' the next minute landed him a sweet one in the face with me fist, an' you can bet, Mister Arthur, I'm sure it never received such a warmin' before. I'll teach him to call you a 'rusty cat.'"

Arthur could not help smiling.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Matt, annoyed.

"Oh, nothing much, but I am afraid you made a mistake this time, Matt. I am sure young Storms would not call me such a name."

"Well, then, he did, Mister—the little sneak."

"Now, are you sure? You said that you were discussing the overly rich."

Matt nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Yes, well, might he not have said aristocrat?" Then Arthur spelled the word: "A-r-i-s-t-o-c-r-a-t, aristocrat. Think again, Matt. Isn't that the word?"

"By jiminy! I believe it is," Matt cried, dropping his spade. "I feel kind o' sorry now for young Storms. I should not ha' struck him."

"It will do him no harm. Besides, a 'rusty cat' and aristocrat sound so much alike the mistake could have been made quite easily."

Thereupon the two laughed good-naturedly over the misunderstanding, while, in his heart, Arthur gloried over the sworn fidelity of this trusty son of Adam.

Just then Noddles, Muriel's pet spaniel, appeared, wagging his tail in delight.

Arthur bent over and stroked the sides of the pretty canine.

"See, Matt, how he speaks to us with his short tail," declared Arthur.

"Ah, he's a fine dog," said Matt, "all animation. How quiet-like he does seem to speak! His tail bein' rather stumpy, I sup-

pose he might be called a stump orator—eh, Mr. Arthur?" and he laughed loudly.

Presently Arthur rose to go. For a few moments he had forgotten his troubles—and Mazie.

"Must you go, Arthur?" asked Matt, kindly.

"Yes, I'm feeling just a little chilly. By the way, Matt, who was that woman I saw you talking to last evening down here at the first corner?"

"Oh, that was Miss Hogges, the old maid who keeps the seed-store on Wortley street."

"Miss Hogges, did you say? The poor thing is to be pitied for having such a name."

"That she is, Mister Arthur. I pity her a whole heap, but then I'm getting too old an' it would be a shame to offer her my name in exchange now," and he chuckled lustily.

"Not every man who dives into the ocean of matrimony brings up a pearl, Matt," declared Arthur.

"Perhaps not. But at all events Hogges will always be on the market," answered Matt, wittily.

"Falling in love is like falling into disgrace," continued Arthur, thoughtfully, "it's easier getting in than out."

There was a tinge of sadness in his voice. He had ben a pupil in the cruel school of Experience.

"Ah, blast all this love business anyway, Arthur. Give me the birds an' the flowers for company. That is all I want. A woman will jump into the sea for a man, an' the story holds just as good on the other side. It's the same everlastin' question all the world over, an' it's as old as the hills. Now the women are raked over the coals—now the men. So I am content to steer clear o' all this bloomin' love business. But here's the best thing o' all, Arthur. There's a woman o' my acquaintance—Jemima Jepson's her name. She beats them all. She lost her speech through a bad cold, an' in one small week she had thirty offers of marriage."

"Now, now, Matt, that's a big one," laughed Arthur. "Poor Jemima! Well, I must go, Matt."

Matt, spade in hand, was soon at work again.

"I don't know what's the matter with that boy, at all, at all," he murmured to himself. "He looks so strange. He's got a world o' trouble in his eyes."

When Arthur entered the house he was met by Mrs. Hawkins.

"Where have you been, Arthur? I have been looking all over for you." She spoke nervously.

"I've been out with Matt in the garden."

"Surely not at this hour!"

"Yes, he is out there digging. My watch played me false this morning."

"But you have not been in bed at all, Arthur! The pillows and covers are just as I left them yesterday."

"True, auntie. When I came in last evening I was so very tired. I merely lay on the couch. But what is the matter, auntie? Your eyes look strange."

"I am afraid you will have to telephone for a doctor. Muriel is very ill. She woke me during the night. Her teeth chattered—she had a severe chill. All night long she has been talking strangely."

Arthur was totally upset. His sister was very dear to him and he hoped that no harm might come to her.

A moment later the two entered the sick girl's room. Muriel lay there with half-shut eyes, moving about uneasily. Her cheeks had a feverish flush and her lips were very parched. The fever tempest was evidently raging.

"Arthur, Arthur!" she called strangely.

He hurried to her side and placed his hand upon her forehead.

"She does not know you are here, Arthur. See, her eyes remain closed."

"She is delirious," said Arthur.

"They told me Mazie was good," muttered the sick girl.

"Mazie!" gasped Arthur. "What can she mean?"

"I saw Mazie in the room," she continued, "and Arthur was there—poor, poor Arthur! I'll twine for them a rose-wreath on their wedding morn. Mazie, Mazie! You must not cry—you must not. Oh, the angels are singing. I can hear them so plainly." A smile stole to her face, a sweet, lingering smile which seemed to have come from afar.

Mrs. Hawkins left the room. "Last night's trial was too much for the poor thing," she thought to herself. "Even in her delirium she is unravelling the threads of her experiences. I hope Arthur will not discover her."

"O God, keep Arthur from harm!" the sick girl pleaded.

"Muriel, Muriel!" he called loudly. "I am here! Listen! Open your eyes; your brother is standing before you!" But not a sign of recognition was written on the young girl's face. She was breathing faster and she spoke with difficulty.

"Take me away from these wicked men! Mazie—Arthur—do you not hear me? They have come to carry me away." Then she mumbled strange-sounding words which Arthur could not understand.

The first gleam of sunlight shone through

the delicate lace curtain and lay about Muriel's hair like a halo of light.

Arthur bent over the tossing form and tenderly kissed the red lips.

"Poor little saint!" he whispered as he rose and gazed upon her. Then the tears came to his eyes. A few minutes later he left the room.

"She is very ill, is she not, Arthur?" Mrs. Hawkins asked in the hall.

"Yes—I'm afraid—I'm afraid Muriel is going."

"For heaven's sake, telephone the doctor at once!"

The doctor arrived in due time.

"She is very ill," he said. "I believe pneumonia is setting in. Did she complain of any pain?" he asked Mrs. Hawkins.

"Yes, in her right side."

"I thought so," he remarked knowingly.

For some weeks Muriel's life hung in the balance, but finally she triumphed. One afternoon in late September, when she had fully recovered, she and her brother were sitting together in the library. It was Muriel's second day downstairs. Naturally she felt elated, but somehow or other she could not help recalling that eventful evening on which she had come across the torn pieces of that mysterious letter. For some days she had been thinking seriously of opening her heart

to her brother and telling him all. But her courage failed her.

Arthur, however, came to her rescue rather unexpectedly. Her references to Mazie during her flights of delirium had set his mind a-thinking. Little wonder then that he spoke rather abruptly. "By the way, Muriel, the first day you were ill I went to your room, but you did not recognize me. Your mind wandered on in strange delirium, yet you mentioned a certain Mazie quite frequently, and you coupled my name with hers. Then you spoke of rose-wreaths and weddings—"

Muriel's cheeks flushed crimson. Had she really referred to these things during her illness?

A painful silence stole between them for some minutes; their eyes stared strangely at each other.

Slowly Muriel began. "Yes, brother, there was more truth than fiction in what I was saying. But before going further, will you promise me not to get angry?"

"I promise, dear!"

Then Muriel related the details of that eventful evening in July—her finding a clue in the mysterious letter and her shadowing him to the Rawlins cottage.

"It was love, Arthur, that urged me to go —love for a brother. I could not resist. The arms of a great temptation encircled me, and

my heart urged me on. I felt that I had you to save—no matter what the cost. That very night I caught the cold—"

"Which came near ending in death, dear sister. However, I can understand your anxiety in the matter, and can blame you only in having been too kind to a brother who does not deserve your affection. Yes, Muriel, I loved Mazie; and now that she has gone out of my life, there will always be a vacant spot which no other shall ever fill."

"Do you mean then, Arthur, that you will never marry?"

"I do, sister. I always dreamed of possessing Mazie, and no woman living will ever be worthy to fill her place."

"You poor boy!" exclaimed Muriel as she rose from her chair and walked over to him. "I pity you." Lovingly she placed her arms about his neck.

There was a gentle rap at the door.

"Come in!" cried Muriel. "Oh, it is you, Kitty."

"Yes, Mister Arthur, the postman just called, so I thought I would bring your mail up here," remarked the kindly maid.

"It's very good of you, Kitty. Thank you!"

"But what is the matter, Kitty?" asked Muriel. "You look as if your mind had been ruffled."

"Oh," replied Kitty, "a thin, miserable, dyspeptic agent just rang the door-bell. He thought I had a whole hour to spare listening to his story. Now, I didn't care whether his brooms were any better than ours. Oh, he was so wise. Imagine, he asked me: 'Is your master at home?' I replied: 'No, he's out, and besides, he never buys brooms.' 'Is your mistress in?' 'No, she's out, too.' Then he got bold and said: 'Well, I'll just come in and warm my feet at the fire until they return.' But I took him short by telling him the fire was out, too, and he'd better call again to-morrow." And, laughing, she ran out of the room.

"She is a great girl," said Arthur as he looked over his mail. "Ah, here's the *Daily Chronicle.* I wonder what's new to-day."

He had barely picked up the paper and commenced reading, when, unconsciously almost, a few words escaped his lips.

"Too bad! too bad!" he whispered, but it was loud enough for Muriel's ears.

When he had gone Muriel picked up the *Daily Chronicle.* The first thing to meet her eyes was the announcement of Mazie Rawlins' marriage to Lawrence Lescot, and in her heart she felt sorry for her brother. It would all have been very nice if Arthur's dream had come true. God, however, willed otherwise.

But a few months before Love had built a

beautiful garden in Arthur Gravenor's young heart, musical with bird song, bright with sunshine, and odorous with rose perfume. But it was not to last long. Ever so soon the transformation had come. Now that same heart was nothing but a bleak desert—covered with the dust and ashes of young, ruined hopes and dreams. Birds and sunshine and flowers had vanished in one moment. The fragrance of memory alone lingered. The dark, heavy shadow had fallen.

CHAPTER V.

In the Grip of the Maelstrom.

"In the rash lustihead of my young powers
I shook the pillaring hours
And pulled my life upon me; grimed with smears,
I stand amid the dust o' the mounded years—
My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.
My days have crackled and gone up in smoke,
Have puffed and burst as sun starts on a stream."

—*Francis Thompson.*

ON a fresh, clear November morning, when the trees shook down their crimson-yellow tinted leaves and the winds wandered sadly over the poor dry earth, the unseen Angel stole slowly and quietly into Grandma Rawlins' room and parted the little thread of life. Hers had been a grand home-coming. Poor little, old mother! Her last words had come in a whisper: "Mazie—some one is calling —I—am—going home. Everything—is—so lovely—and—bright." Then her soul trembled through the white gates of eternity into the dawn.

Some weeks later Mazie and Lawrence sat by the evening fire. The old clock on the wall ticked away pleasantly. It was like a third voice joining in their quiet conversation. Something had been on Lawrence's mind all day. At last he began:

"Mazie, darling, would you like to remain in Kempton always?"

"It seems strange that you should ask me such a question," answered his wife.

"No, it is not strange. I was only picturing a home elsewhere, that's all."

"Then you are not satisfied here, Lawrence?" she asked, looking up into his large gray eyes.

"Yes, Mazie, I am satisfied. I like Kempton, but—"

"But what, Lawrence?"

"I would like to get away—to go to another place. Perhaps I could do better."

Mazie did not know that her husband had had words with Arthur at the mill that very morning. Ever since the marriage Arthur had hated Lawrence with a deadly hatred. He never passed him without cursing him from the bottom of his jealous heart. Had it not been for this man, Mazie's love would have gone out to the mill-owner—unobstructed, glorious and free. Lawrence, too, could not help noticing his master's changed attitude, and this naturally kept him somewhat ill at ease.

On this particular morning Lawrence had entered the mill ten minutes after the whistle had sounded.

"Never mind starting work this morning, Lescot. I do not need you," Arthur said to

him at the door. "You have evidently forgotten that we start at seven," he added sarcastically.

"I am sorry, Mr. Gravenor," Lescot replied. "I would have been here on time, but on the way I met an old woman who had fallen and broken her leg. She was all alone and in great pain, so I telephoned for an ambulance and remained with her until it arrived. Besides—"

"I'll not listen to your 'besides' at all. You've got to go, Lescot—that's all." And he snapped his fingers in Lawrence's face.

"Mr. Gravenor, what do you mean? What have I ever done to displease you? I do my work at the mill here honestly, and you pay me for it. I cannot understand why you should want to get rid of me. What have I done?"

"More, Lescot, than you dream of," Gravenor answered vehemently. "I hate to see your face about the place now. It reminds me of—." He bit his lips, and the name of the woman he loved stuck in his throat.

Lawrence stood transfixed for a moment, wondering what Gravenor's words meant.

"Then you do not intend telling me, Mr. Gravenor, why you discharge me," the young man remarked sadly.

"No, Lescot, you shall never know. Come to the office and I shall hand you your week's wages."

Some minutes later Lawrence Lescot closed the old mill door, never to open it again. When he was gone a wicked, disdainful look crept into Arthur's eyes as he remarked: "I could not bear to see his face about here any longer. God knows I can't help hating him. It is wrong, very wrong, but this jealous, unforgiving heart prompts me to it all. Ah, Mazie, you yet will suffer for all of this—remember!"

Little wonder, then, that Lawrence felt downcast all day. Gravenor's sentences tortured him. What could the man mean? Was he going mad?

Lawrence ransacked his brain for hours. It was a fruitless search. Conscience within, however, whispered: "You are innocent—innocent." All day long this consoling voice sounded in his ears, even though the mill-owner's cruel words were ever uppermost in him. When evening came his mind was still restless; and he felt as if he ought to unburden his thoughts to his wife. But why worry her? Yet as they sat together by the pleasant evening fire a feeling came that he must tell her all.

"You would like to get away from Kempton, Lawrence," she asked again.

"Yes, Mazie, I would like to leave the city for good."

"But why this sudden change? Have you

had trouble at the mill? Any words with Mr. Gravenor?"

Mrs. Lescot had expected hearing of trouble from this source ever since her wedding morn. She knew Arthur had loved her deeply, and feared that jealousy might urge him to strike a blow which might affect both herself and her husband, so long as the latter was still in his power at the mill.

"Has there been any trouble at the mill, Lawrence?" she asked again, with strange misgivings in her heart.

Lawrence remained silent. What was he to do? Was he to tell Mazie what the mill-owner had said to him? He hardly knew which course to take. He had never heard anything of Arthur Gravenor's attentions to his wife previous to the marriage. Mazie, thinking it best, had never alluded to it. On many occasions even, he remembered distinctly having heard her speak kindly of him.

Presently his thoughts changed and strength was given him to overlook the cruel morning's proceedings. He smiled upon his wife's troubled face and answered: "No, darling, nothing much happened at the mill—only I have given up work there. I did not altogether like my job, Mazie. The hours were too long, and there was not enough money in it. I know I can do better elsewhere."

"I am so glad that nothing happened, dear. If the city does not suit your plans now, I'll go with you to the other end of the earth. You have my love—"

"And I have two strong arms," he interrupted. "Surely with such weapons, Mazie, we can brave the fiercest battle."

"And be victors in the end, Lawrence," she added joyfully. "Now that mother is gone I have no special desire to remain in Kempton."

Mazie knew, if she remained, she could not help being reminded of a little heart history which she was trying to forget. Gravenor's name would not be forgotten so easily. He had thrust himself into her life when the skies were brightest. With him so very near, she feared lest the darkening shadows might come.

For some minutes neither spoke. The minds of both were tempest-tossed. Mazie's thoughts stole back to that evening on which she had sent Arthur a letter, begging him to leave her in peace, and Lawrence, poor fellow, could not help remembering his master's cruel words. Again he felt like telling his wife, and again his judgment urged him not to do so.

The clock struck the hour of ten, its chimes playing a sweet interlude, pleasing to both.

"Where do you intend going, Lawrence?" Mazie asked.

"I have not yet decided fully, but it will be many miles from here," he replied.

"It will be very hard for me to leave this little cottage. It was always such a cosy nesting-place, and poor mother's presence seems to have made these very rooms sacred. I seem to hear her calling me now, Lawrence. Oh, you don't know how I miss her. I go to her room and find her bed empty. And the two thin hands that used to clasp mine so tenderly—they welcome me no more. Dear mother!"

The poor woman's eyes filled with tears. Lawrence caught her head in his arms and tenderly stroked her hair.

"Do not weep so, Mazie," he murmured, kissing her. "You know there's much for us to do. We are going into a land of brightness to carve our future. So take my hand and help me to face the rising sun." Thereupon he drew her to his strong, manly bosom in all the ecstasy of love.

One week later, Arthur Gravenor, driving down Shelbourne avenue, noticed that the Rawlins cottage was empty and deserted. Mazie and Lawrence had left Kempton for good. A sudden paleness came to his face as he drove past. He had often regretted his hasty act at the mill.

"I am sorry they are gone," he whispered

to himself. "I am sorry that I shall never look upon Mazie again."

Five years passed—uneventful years for Arthur Gravenor. From sunrise to sunset, year in and year out, he had worked in his office at the mill—worked like a machine, taking little or no pleasure out of life. A great change, too, had come over him. One would hardly have recognized him. He had aged prematurely, and his thin, troubled face showed clearly that he was a disappointed man. It was full of the deep lines of suffering—the little drained rivers which always remain. Life had dealt severely with him. He looked like a man who had already run life's race and lost. He had tried hard to forget Mazie, but he could not. She still clung fast to his everyday thoughts. He had never pictured going through life without her, and now that she had left Kempton he worried and fretted. Soon it became a disease with him. Before long it poisoned his mind, for Gravenor was a weakling, a prey to many evil influences that harbored no good promise. Then came the breakdown—the reaction of all those gloomy months of suffering, and he was obliged to relinquish his duties at the office. Gradually reduced in health and strength, he was soon on the verge of a collapse. His nerves were ready to snap and

give out at the slightest provocation. At times he became moody and melancholic. Everybody noticed the sudden change in his disposition. Stricken down in the prime of life, just when his dreams might have been rosiest, Arthur Gravenor, young mill-owner and multi-millionaire, was a broken-down man in body and in spirit.

Many a young life had spent its energies before the altars of Love. Arthur Gravenor was a rapt devotee at the same shrine, but his heart and mind had been poisoned by a jealousy which consumed with deadly fires. He felt that he had suffered a great, a grievous wrong, and that Heaven was on his side. He was in the terrible clutch of the undertow and was too weak to raise himself from out of the mire. Had his eyes sought the clear, blue skies and the loving guidance of the Master above him, Love's aftermath might indeed have been sweet for him. But now, alas! he must reap the harvest of all his misguided energies and fight the forceful grip of the maelstrom—to win. To win? Ah, yes—but alas! it was too late. His face was set, his muscles were stiff, and his strength was gone. He might fight the maelstrom, but only to be thrown limp and helpless on the sandy shore.

The occupants of Bleur House were greatly concerned about their master's health.

"I often wonder why such a visitation should have come upon Arthur," Mrs. Hawkins remarked to Muriel one day. "He was such a bright, fine young fellow, full of ambition and endurance of the right sort, but he is going down fast, and something will have to be done very soon."

"The cause of the whole trouble, auntie," said Muriel, "was that girl—Mazie Rawlins; not that any blame should be attached to her, but then, you know, my brother fairly idolized her, and dreamt of making her his wife. Disappointment, however, was to be his portion, and since the day Lawrence Lescot married Arthur has been a changed man. But something must be done, and that soon."

The door-bell sounded. A few moments later, Dr. Cascada, the attending physician of the Gravenors, entered. He was a well-dressed, pleasant-looking little man, up in the sixties.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hawkins—Muriel!" he said cheerily as he shook hands with the two women. "This is a delightful morning, quite breezy and invigorating. How is Arthur getting on?"

"We were speaking of him," Muriel answered, "when you entered. He seems no better. He sleeps little and eats barely anything at all. He will probably be down in a few minutes. What do you think ails him, doctor?"

"He is a confirmed neurasthenic, and has a delusion or two of the unfaithfulness of a certain Mazie who has wronged him."

"Ah, that's not a delusion at all, doctor," interrupted Mrs. Hawkins, peering through her eyeglasses. "It's gospel truth. You see Arthur loved Mazie Rawlins. She never encouraged him, and when later she married another, his heart was broken."

"I see—I see," cried the doctor, thoughtfully. "That's news to me. Then all he has been telling about Mazie is true. However, this matter has had such an influence upon his mind that he cannot think of anything else. By the way, I dropped in as I passed this morning to offer a suggestion. How would it be to take Arthur to the seashore? I think he would improve much faster removed from his present surroundings."

"That's a good idea, doctor," interrupted Muriel. "Auntie and I have just been wondering what could be done. You have helped us greatly to solve the problem. Where had we better take him, doctor?"

"If I had my choice, Muriel," he answered, "I think I would go to the Place o' Pines. It is a pretty spot, summer all the year round, and hundreds of pleasant guests always there."

"But that is so very far from here, doctor," rejoined Mrs. Hawkins. "Do you think Arthur could stand the journey?"

"It is quite a distance," the doctor said, "but then the trip would not be too much for him. Half of it is by rail, the other half by water. It's a glorious spot. Nature looks her loveliest there. The Place o' Pines is a heaven of lilies and roses."

"It will just be perfectly delightful to send him to such a place," Muriel exclaimed joyfully.

"To send him, did you say?" questioned the doctor. "Ah, that would be a serious mistake. No, he must not go alone. Someone will have to accompany him. How about yourself, Muriel?"

"I would be delighted to go," answered the girl.

"Your wish shall be gratified," said Mrs. Hawkins. "You will be good company for Arthur, and I think you can manage him the best. I shall also send Kitty along. She will be a help to both of you."

"And when do you think we should leave, doctor?" questioned Muriel.

"As soon as possible."

There were sounds of footsteps on the stairs.

"It is Arthur," remarked Muriel. "I shall send him in, doctor, at once. Remember that you get him to sign that contract for a trip to the Place o' Pines," she continued smilingly, as she glided out of the room.

CHAPTER VI.

The Place o' Pines.

"O thoughtless mortals! ever blind to fate,
Too soon dejected, and too soon elate."
—*Pope.*

THE lavish hand of beneficent Nature had indeed endowed the Place o' Pines with quaint, picturesque beauty. It was a pleasant place to summer in—away from all the dust and smoke and feverish excitement of the ambitious city. The song of Toil never lingered in its pleasant, well-kept avenues. All was peace and quiet. Tired humanity came longing for rest; and rest was given them under the stately pines and bright, tranquil stars.

For half a century the Place o' Pines had been one of the most fashionable summer resorts in the country. All the year round the five large hotels were filled with pleasure-seeking guests. People came and went continually.

The cold snows of winter never visited the Place o' Pines. There the summer lingered all the year round, throwing her gladsome, eternal smile upon lake and river, mountain and meadow. The air was alive with busy birds; and the music of their voices, floating upon the wings of the breezes, brought many

a weary one a message of hope and joy and love. Flowers, too, of every description bloomed there—breathers of delicate perfumes for sighing hearts.

The Place o' Pines was rather a large tract of land, comprising several hundred acres. It derived its name from the several groups of pine forest. Outside of the city proper, one came across as rural a piece of country as was possible. Yet its rugged splendor was intensely pleasing to the æsthetic eye. Here nature existed unmolested, glorious and real, just as God had fashioned her. The pine forests, rich in game, were a special delight to many of the guests. The city itself stood on the very edge of the lake. It was a place of magnificent homes, fine parks and well-kept streets and lawns. Nearly all the houses were of white cement, and stood out in fine contrast against the dark-green background of primeval trees. Then there was the beach —that delightful, glistening stretch of several miles—where the bathers loved to linger in the early morning and at sundown. And for miles, as far as eye could reach, quivered and trembled that mighty, green expanse of water —the sea, restless and terrible.

Arthur Gravenor could not have approached the Place o' Pines on a more auspicious day than that first day of December. He was fairly enraptured with the view which greeted

his eyes from the deck of the steamer. The sunlight lay upon the pleasant, white city like the blessing of heaven. In the distance the soft blue hills lifted their faces to the clouds, and still farther off shone the dark, brooding pine forests, mighty but lonely-looking.

"This is glorious!" exclaimed Muriel. "I seem to think we are about to enter the very portals of heaven."

"It must be a fine spot to rest in," remarked Arthur, somewhat wearily. "I hope I shall feel improved when I leave the place."

"Dr. Cascada's a dandy," exclaimed Kitty, as her eyes took in the surroundings. "Yes, sir-ee, that little bundle of nerves is a dandy for having directed us here. I think he knows a thing or two. The morning I left, I met him up town and he seemed surprised to see me. 'Well, well, Kitty, are you alive yet?' he asked. You know, he had not seen me since I had the rheumatism. 'Alive yet?' I cried. 'Well, yes, doctor, bless my soul! You see, I did not take that last dose of medicine you gave me at the hospital, when the rheumatism touched my heart—and that's the reason I am here to-day.' Well, I wish you could have seen him laugh. His face got so red I was scared. I thought sure he'd have a stroke."

"I am surprised, Kitty," Muriel said reproachfully, "that you should speak so rudely to the doctor. He is very precise, you know."

"Ah, sure, Miss Muriel, that's nothing. Why, Dr. Cascada knows me very well. Besides, he knows my mother, and he knew my mother's mother and my mother's mother's mother and my mother's—"

"Stop, stop, Kitty!" Muriel interrupted, laughingly, "if you continue, you'll have the poor little doctor as old as the hills. You'll have him coming across the pond shaking hands with Noah in the ark."

The steamer was pulling into shore where groups of men, women and children stood waiting for friends and relatives. The orchestra on deck was playing lively music, full of melody and enthusiasm. The singing, haunting air fairly set Muriel's responsive heart athrill. She could not help feeling glad, for soon she was to set foot upon the Place o' Pines—cherished spot that had been the burden of many a dream. Yet now and then a strange feeling crept into her tender heart. She could not help worrying about her brother; and she hoped that God would restore the smile to his face and the bright, buoyant spirit to his heart.

For a moment Arthur stood still, listening to the music. His eyes had a vacant stare in them, and his thoughts seemed to be wandering down the well-trodden, grassy lanes of other days

"unto that valley of dreams,
Beyond the mountains of heart's despair,
The hills of winter and snow,
Those shores of blossom and wing,
Over the mountains of waiting,
Over the hills of spring."

It seemed hard for him to break away from the thoughts which after all were filled with nothing but haunting memories for him. Yet he loved her—this poor, dead, sorrowful Past. She had entered so largely into his narrow life that he could never divorce her from himself. The noble, living, promising Present stood before him—smiling, white angel that she was—beckoning him into fairer regions; but no, he loved the old ways, the old lanes the best. His feet were so used to the press of the cruel thorns that she, with all her golden promise-cups filled to the brim, could never lure him away. He lived not for the days that were yet to be. He only lived for the days that were no more.

"Come, Arthur," cried Muriel. "See! we have at last reached shore. The passengers are leaving the steamer."

Aroused somewhat suddenly from his musings, Arthur raised his startled eyes to his sister.

"I had forgotten we were so near the Place o' Pines," he said. "My thoughts were back in Kempton."

"Ah, brother mine, you must not think of

Kempton any more. Try to forget all about the outside world while we are here. Arthur, I want you to go back to Kempton well and strong. So, for the present, please have nothing to worry about."

"I'll try very hard, sister, but do you think the wrongs that were done me will ever be righted by a just Providence? Do you think that—"

"Now, Arthur, please stop—for my sake, do! You must not wander into that strain any more. You know all those things are purely imaginary—idle children of the brain and—"

"Ah, but they are not imaginary," he pleaded. "They are real."

"Arthur, I implore, I beseech you, speak no more of it," she entreated, taking him by the arm. "You are just torturing yourself; and besides, if you want to get well, you will have to throw the past aside like an old garment. It pains me deeply to hear you dwell upon these things continually."

"I am sorry, Muriel. I shall try harder, but you know when these thoughts come I cannot resist. They pounce upon my weary brain like a pack of wolves, and fear—fear almost drives me mad. But I shall try, Muriel."

"Thanks, Arthur," she responded kindly. "Come, Kitty, we disembark now."

Kitty opened wide her eyes. She had been thinking of the thousands and thousands of miles that separated her from Silas, and her heart ached. Then, turning abruptly, she took Arthur by the other arm, and in a moment the three were moving towards the gangplank.

There was a frantic rush on the steamer, everybody, seemingly, wanting to reach shore first. When the path was not so crowded Kitty gave a sigh of relief. A few minutes later they stood on shore, glad that the long journey was at an end. Arthur immediately summoned a cab.

"Look, Muriel!" Kitty exclaimed dryly. "There goes Miss Oates, the old maid," pointing to a very tall, lean-looking woman who was just then passing a few feet in front of them. "'What brings her down here?"

Miss Oates was the richest woman in Kempton. She had acquired an immense fortune through fraud and dishonesty, having cheated her poor sister out of thousands which her father had bequeathed to her. And everyone in Kempton hated her for it.

"I wonder what brings Miss Oates to the Place o' Pines?" Kitty questioned again.

"Love, Kitty," answered Muriel. "I heard only a few days before leaving that she was to be married shortly to an outsider, and

that she was to travel thousands of miles to meet him."

"There comes a peculiar-looking mortal," remarked Arthur, "the stout little man yonder with the open smile on his red face. See! he is lifting his hat to Miss Oates. Now they are shaking hands. Listen!"

"Evelyn! my dear! I am so glad you came," the fat little man exclaimed smilingly.

"Oh, Maurice," she gasped, "to think that I should come these many miles for you!"

The three listeners who had overheard the conversation exchanged glances hurriedly.

"The love-sick goose!" laughed Kitty. "She's worse than an eighteen-year-old."

"I am sure that's Miss Oates' intended," remarked Muriel. "I heard that his first name was Maurice."

"The wretch!" muttered Kitty, "to think that her poor sister is starving in a hovel in Kempton, and she parading here in silks and laces! Maurice! that 'Oates' is ripe for a thrashin' this long time—and I feel as if I could superintend the job."

It was another of Kitty's little witticisms, and Muriel and Arthur could not restrain their laughter.

Just then the cab drove up.

"Where'll I take you, sir?" the colored cabby asked politely.

"To the Clarendon, please," answered Arthur.

"Very well. We'll be there in ten minutes, sir," said the cabby as he closed the door.

Then the horses' hoofs sounded on the pavement, and the cab went spinning down the avenue of pines.

CHAPTER VII.

Dregs of Sorrow.

' Never morning wore
To evening but some heart did break."
—*Tennyson.*

IN the very heart of the Place o' Pines, on a narrow, clean, shady street, stood a neat little white cottage, surrounding which was a rose garden. Roses of every description bloomed here all the year round, pink and red and white and yellow, in their dainty velvet dresses, tossing their merry faces to the sun, while the bees, gay paramours, sipped the honeyed nectar from their scented lips. The island was full of many such gardens. There was a great demand for roses generally, and the vendors did good business disposing of them to the guests at the various hotels.

In this particular garden, on a mild December morning, a woman was at work, cutting the long rose-stems and carrying the flowers to a large table that stood near the garden gate. Two small children—a boy and a girl —followed her down the sunny paths, happy-hearted and free, darting here, there, everywhere like two silken butterflies, through that flowery place of splendor. The woman took

a special delight in her garden. It helped her to make a living for herself and her two children. Twice daily she could be seen wandering through the various hotels with roses in her arms, and when she returned to her cottage her arms were empty and her purse was full.

The woman looked a picture of loveliness as she moved about the fragrant garden in her sombre, plain, black dress, her face radiant with the glory of the sunshine that lay gently upon everything around. She had the appearance of one who had tasted deeply of life's joys and life's sorrows. For her, life's brightest sun had risen to sink into unutterable darkness; for her, life's fairest flowers had blossomed, in the gay morning sunshine, to fade in the heat of an afternoon. Little wonder, then, that her pale yet beautiful face still showed the deep lines which the tears had formed; little wonder, too, that her eyes harbored a troubled, restless look.

The two little children had wandered away from their mother. The bay, glittering in the sunlight, lay right outside of the garden, and there, on the sandy beach, they stood watching the ships come in. The bay was very restless. From the far horizon, in all their mad rush and fury, the white-capped horses came galloping in, their snowy manes dangling carelessly in the blue-green water. And the sound

of their footsteps was like the roar of mighty thunder.

Presently the woman discovered the two children in the sand.

"Ah, this is where you are," she said joyfully. "Don't go out any farther into the water. Constance, darling, be careful! It is very deep there."

The little one clapped her hands together joyfully.

"See, mama," she cried, as she lifted her bare foot out of the water. "Oh, it's so nice!"

"But where are your shoes and stockings?"

"Under de fence," answered the boy.

Just then a steamer came swinging up from the south. It was moving along swiftly. Soon it would be passing them.

"Oh, mama," shouted the boy, "dere comes papa's ship!"

"Ah, yes, it's the *El Dorado*," the poor woman sighed heavily. "It looks like a new vessel now that it has been remodelled since the catastrophe."

Often in times gone by the two children had stood there, waving their tiny handkerchiefs to their father. He had been the captain of the *El Dorado*.

"I wonder if papa is dere to-day," the boy remarked thoughtfully to his mother. "Let's

see. I'll tate my handertief an' wave it in de air, mama."

The next moment a little hand waved, but alas! no kindly salute came from the steamer's deck this time as the *El Dorado* shot through the hissing waves.

The poor woman's eyes filled with tears. "Poor Lawrence! poor Lawrence!" she sobbed.

"Mama, why does papa not wave to me any more?" questioned the boy.

"Papa, po' papa!" chimed in Constance.

"Listen, mama," the boy continued. "Why does papa not tum home any more? He's been away a lon' time now."

"Papa's gone on a long, long journey, dear, and he's not coming back any more," the mother answered in tears.

"He's don' on a lon', lon' trip, mama—so far, far away," the boy repeated, his eyes opening wide.

"Yes, my darling. Your papa's gone to heaven."

"To be an angel?" interrupted the child, "an angel, away up dere in de sky? But mama, tant Tonstance an' me go up dere to se 'im?" he asked pleadingly.

"No, my boy. It is so far away. We will all go together some day, children, when God calls us home. Some day—" she repeated thoughtfully.

"Did 'ou say God, mama? Is papa wiv God?"

"Yes, pet. Your papa is with God in heaven."

"Oh, I'm so glad," the child remarked as he folded his hands to his breast, a smile stealing to his face. "Den he does not sail no more, mama?"

"No, dear, he is watching us every day and praying for us."

The figure of a man was seen coming up the beach. Constance espied him and in a moment she was out of the water.

"Papa's tummin', papa's tummin'," she cried childishly as her face brightened eagerly.

The mother turned toward her garden with a sigh. "Poor Lawrence, poor Lawrence!" she sobbed. Then in louder voice she called: "Come, children, let's go in." Her heart was nigh to breaking. She knew too well that he had gone forever, and that the two little ones would wait in vain for their father's return.

This woman in black was no other than Mazie Lescot—widow of Lawrence Lescot. After leaving Kempton, the two came to the Place o' Pines. Lawrence joined the crew of the *El Dorado*. His associates were fond of him, and in a very short time he was promoted to the position of captain. The *El Dorado* was one of the largest vessels sailing the waters just then, and the captaincy necessarily

brought with it a substantial salary. The first years therefore passed happily for Mazie and Lawrence. Their heaven was complete. Lawrence was of a saving disposition, and, when his bank account had run up into a snug sum, he built the little white cottage which was to be a home for himself, wife and children. But when their hopes were highest, just when their dreams were loveliest and their hearts warmest, the darkening shadows again came.

Mazie waited patiently one day for her husband's return. He did not come. Evening was setting in over the roaring, black waters, and then the truth was borne home to her. They told her that the *El Dorado*, during a severe storm, had struck a rock and had become utterly ruined; that the ship had sunk into the watery depths, bearing with it the lives of several hundred people.

A few, however, escaped, and a rescuing steamer picked them up. These three men immediately came to the little white cottage, and told Mazie how Lawrence had struggled faithfully to the last in a noble endeavor to save the ship from ruin and her occupants from death. But it was useless, they said. The waters poured in upon them and quickly all sank down, deeper and deeper, until the waves closed over them.

It was a crushing and cruel blow to Mazie.

She walked the floor incessantly, her arms extended imploringly to heaven, and in the extremity of anguish cried out: "O God! why did you take Lawrence from me? He was a good man. Poor, poor Lawrence!"

"Mrs. Lescot," remarked the old fireman, who had joined the *El Dorado's* crew on that May morning she sped out of the harbor for the first time, full of power and majesty, "you must not cry so! Lawrence died a hero. I saw him on deck giving kindly words to the stricken unto the last. As I battled with the mighty waves I could hear him crying out loudly—and oh! the message was so full of comfort for all of us:—'Good people, hear me! if die we must let us die like Christians!' Then he sank upon his knees and, as the ship went down, I caught the sound of his manly voice in prayer—a prayer of thanksgiving to the eternal Father in heaven. Oh! it was all so sweet, I could not help thinking the angels were very near all the while."

That evening, when the men were gone, Mazie put the little ones to bed and kissed them tenderly. As she looked upon them in their spotless beds, her heart, deprived now of its most precious treasure, went out to God, craving consolation.

Then she walked across the room, opened the window that looked out upon the tranquil night, and for a long time watched the moon-

beams come and go upon the troubled, angry waters. The tears fell abundantly from her eyes. She realized now that her heart was an empty cage from which the cherished bird had flown, never to return again—realized, poor, suffering, brave-hearted woman, that the tender, soothing voice had ceased singing—the voice that had so often in the past proclaimed the freshness and joy of a constant Springtime love which had made this poor, sordid old earth into very heaven for them.

CHAPTER VIII.

The Rose-Queen.

"Her overpowering presence made you feel
It would not be idolatry to kneel."

—*Byron.*

WHEN Mazie Lescot realized what it meant to be without a husband, she faced the cold future with many forebodings in her heart. Lawrence had always been a good provider, and now that the only bread-winner was gone, she wondered what would become of her and her children. Had he lived another year the little cottage would have been entirely free from debt. As matters stood now, another large payment was due. The debt haunted her continually. She could not help picturing herself destitute and homeless in the streets. She was after all but a woman, with a woman's heart, and for days she went about worrying. She had always dreamt of years of wedded bliss, and when the hour of her loss came, it struck her heart a cruel blow. She could not understand why Lawrence should have been stricken down in the pride of manhood, when his blood flowed strongest in his veins. There were others around, pale-faced men and women, white with the burden of the years and disease, anx-

iously awaiting their call from God, with faces staring down into their graves, yet the grim Reaper passed them by. But Mazie did not complain. She knew that the God of heaven was a just and merciful Father, and that He would help to care for her and her children just as He did for the birds and the animals of the earth. In time the sorrow passed away, and courage came to the woman in black. Soon the future glowed full of promise—the future that was to witness the blossoming, the unfolding, of her children's careers. Life still had its attractions for her. So long as there were children to love, her mother-heart would be satisfied.

One day, several weeks later, the holder of the mortgage on her house called to see her.

"Do not worry about the mortgage, Mrs. Lescot," he said kindly. "We will not press you hard for the money. Pay us a little whenever you can. If it takes you years to pay all, be satisfied to know that the holder of the mortgage will not complain. We realize too well what the *El Dorado* disaster really means to you and the two pairs of bright eyes yonder, and we feel sorry for you."

"They feel sorry for me," Mazie whispered to herself when he was gone. "Ah! it is all so very kind of them. Thank God, there are good men living still!"

From that day on Mazie Lescot was a new woman and faced the future with a woman's will and a woman's courage. The mortgage would be paid in time, and then the cottage would be her own. So she set to work in her garden, planted rosebushes and disposed of the flowers to the guests at the hotels. This was her only income, but she managed to save enough to pay a certain amount on the mortgage each month and still lay aside a balance for a rainy day. Twice daily she could be seen wandering through the places of fashion, her arms full of roses. She was a very familiar figure to the many guests in the hotels and parks. Other women were there selling flowers, but they looked commonplace whenever she was near. Her face and figure were noticeable among all the others. She was so beautiful no one could help admiring her. No wonder then that everybody knew her as the "Rose-Queen." It was a name an actor had given her one day as she passed him by, and it clung to her always.

The Gravenors had been in the Place o' Pines two weeks. So far they had been greatly delighted with the restful surroundings and the charming people. Men, tired of business; artists and actors, sick of narrow Bohemian dens; novelists and poets, carvers of fine, enchanting dreams; women, weary of household duties, were there: all finding rest

and pleasure during their stay on the island. Concerts were continually in progress on the various roof-gardens and in the luxurious parks. People, tired of music, revelled in the joys that boating, fishing and bathing afforded them. Others hied away to the pine forests, rifle in hand, in search of game.

One afternoon Arthur lay carelessly in a hammock in one of the balconies of the hotel. A cool breeze blew lightly from the lake. It was a fine, clear day. The sky was a perfect blue, almost cloudless. From afar came the sound of the ocean's *barcarolle*, tender and soothing, and from the sun-kissed beach stole the voices of the merry bathers. Nature and the heart of humanity throbbed gladly under the influences of fresh, quickening joy.

Muriel and Kitty had gone for a quiet stroll through the city. Arthur was therefore left all to himself on the balcony, nearly all the guests having gone to listen to a fine programme of music on the roof-garden above. The change of scene had so far made little impression upon his mind. For hours he would sit and dream. His eyes were beginning to show that strange, wild stare we associate with a vacant mind. He could not divorce himself from the bitter past. Mazie stood before him continually, and his mind was ever busy multiplying the many wrongs which he imagined had been thrust upon him

by some evil spirit. Had Mazie listened to his plea, then everything would have gone well with him. He could never forget the night on which she had ordered him from her door. Ever since, he imagined strange beings, evil spirits, had taken possession of his soul and body, haunting and driving him to his doom. With the exception of this one delusion of persecution and wrong-doing, Arthur Gravenor's mind was perfectly clear and sane.

He turned about nervously in his hammock. His mind had been too occupied to notice the music upstairs. Presently, however, a fine tenor voice sounded through the air. Signor Frescati was singing—the noted singer of the Royal Italian opera company. He had come to the Place o' Pines for a rest after a busy London season. Arthur raised himself on his elbows and listened eagerly for every word from the singer's lips. He could hear every line distinctly, and it was a soothing, tender lyric that nipped at his heart-strings.

"O my Luve's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June:
O my Luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.
As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luve am I:
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

"Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands of life shall run.
And fare thee weel, my only luve,
And fare thee weel a while!
And I will come again, my luve,
Tho' it were ten thousand mile."

"And I will come again, my Luve," he repeated to himself when the song was finished, "tho' it were ten thousand mile." A sigh escaped his lips. "Yes, Mazie, darling, I long to see your face again," he whispered, "but—"

A strange, unearthly look came into his eyes, and for some time he stared into space. He was picturing Mazie as he had seen her that first bright April morning, years ago. He could see her now, in her white dress and her large lace-covered hat, hurrying from church, the whisper of prayer still lingering upon her lips. He remembered so well the shy glances she threw at him as she passed by and the little blush that came unbidden to her cheeks. Ah! it had been glorious, this awakening of love in his heart, when the tired, old earth was rising from out the gloom of winter. This awakening of a new self was grateful in those early, white hours of Love's dawning. His thoughts stole to the gloomy night that had come so suddenly with its dark, heavy shadows and forever blotted out the brightness of

Hope's young day. Another sigh escaped his lips, more prolonged and painful.

Again the singer's voice sounded in his ears—

> "Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
> And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
> I will luve thee still, my dear,
> While the sands of life shall run."

"While the sands of life shall run," he repeated slowly and thoughtfully, lingering long upon the meaning of the lines.

Soon he was aroused from his musings by the sound of footsteps above him. The concert was over, and presently the guests began to appear. Hundreds of voices stole nearer and nearer. In another minute men, women and children poured into the balconies. Arthur rose from his hammock, seated himself on a chair near by and watched the activities of the bathers on the beach. He felt a slight tap on his shoulder. Somewhat startled, he turned and saw a man smiling into his face.

"Ah, it is you, signor," he cried. "Come, sit down and let's have a chat."

It was Signor Frescati. He had been one of the first friends Arthur had made at the Place o' Pines. They saw each other frequently during the course of the day. The signor's apartments were directly opposite

Arthur's room. Often on an evening the two sat together enjoying quiet chats.

Signor Frescati was a well-built man of about thirty, not overly tall, with coal-black hair and the olive-tinted complexion of a son of Italy. His general appearance bespoke the man of culture, the careless artist accustomed to life "in Bohemia."

"Do you smoke, Arthur?" questioned the signor as he seated himself. "If you do, you are welcome to this rich blend of rare tobacco," handing him his cigar case. "They are imported. A friend of mine in Naples keeps me well supplied."

"Thanks, signor, I shall try one."

The two sat, surrounded by gray clouds of smoke, evidently enjoying the drift of their conversation.

"By the way, signor," said Arthur, "that was a fine song you sang at the afternoon recital—a dainty little lyric, full of genuine feeling. The words are beautiful—and the music was simply superb."

"Do not flatter me, good fellow," the signor interrupted. "Possibly you do not know that the music is my own. You, of course, recognized the lines. It is my favorite lyric of Bobbie Burns."

"Really, I did not recognize the poem at all, and yet I have read it many a time. I always had a strong *attrait* for Burns. His

simple honesty and humility caught my heart."

"Speaking of that song, Gravenor, reminds me of a little story in connection with it. It was in late winter, after a very busy London season, when, one day, I was invited to sing at Windsor Castle. My heart had never dreamt of such an honor. The noble, gray-haired Queen Victoria, whom all the nations loved and honored, gave me a hearty welcome. At first I sang opera, then followed a bit of oratorio, and later a few ballads. The Queen was delighted with them all. She and one of the princesses and her lady-in-waiting were the only people in the salon. After a delightful, informal chat the Queen asked me to sing a few little folk-songs which she loved. Then we drifted on to Bobbie Burns, and I soon learned that Her Majesty fairly worshipped this plain singer of the fields and people. 'Do you know his lines—"O my Luve's like a red, red rose"?' she asked me. 'Are they not pretty? They've been set to music, but I cannot recall the composer. Can you?' she asked. I told her that I did not remember. 'But will you not sing them for me, signor?' she continued. 'I would so like to hear them.' I replied that I had not the music. 'But I am sure,' she interrupted, 'you can easily improvise a melody. Do, please!' So I sat down at the piano and lo! the inspiration

came. Presently my voice accompanied the soothing air which stole from my finger-tips. It was the same air you have just heard. It was so beautiful that I wrote it down that very evening. When I had finished the song, I turned and saw that the poor Queen was weeping. She had evidently been thinking of her betrothed, whose picture hung on the opposite side of the room. 'It was sung beautifully, signor,' she said to me, rising and taking me by the hand, 'and I thank you.' One week later I received this valuable gold pin from the Queen—a precious cameo of Bobbie Burns, inscribed on the other side, you see, 'Victoria, R.'"

"It is very beautiful, signor," Arthur remarked, as he examined the precious souvenir, "and to think that it should have been given you by a queen!"

At that moment there was a little excitement several yards away. The sound of voices startled the two men in their conversation. The signor turned in his chair.

"Ah, I see now," he exclaimed, "the Rose-Queen is coming down the stairs, and the people are rushing for roses."

"The Rose-Queen, signor? Where is she? I have heard so much of her."

"She's a beautiful woman, Gravenor, plainly dressed, but withal a model. Do you not see her?"

"Where—where is she?"

By this time Arthur was standing on tiptoe, gazing over the hundreds of heads in front of him.

"Where is she, signor? I do not see her."

"Do you see that tall man over there with red whiskers?"

"Yes."

"And the puny old woman in front of him?"

"Yes."

"Well, two people down from this woman stands the Rose-Queen. She is just bending over now and handing a few roses to an elderly woman. Look at her smile, those eyes—ah! she's—"

"I see her now," gasped Gravenor. "It is Mazie!"

He became weak, the color left his face, and he would have fallen had not the signor caught him in his arms.

"What is the matter, Arthur?" kindly asked the signor as he lowered him into the hammock.

"Just a little weak spell I get occasionally, signor, thank you."

CHAPTER IX.

Hope Rises High.

"Hope is a lover's staff; walk hence with that,
And manage it against despairing thoughts!"
—*Shakespeare.*

IT took some time for Arthur to recover from the great surprise Mazie's sudden appearance had caused him. He felt nervous and restless, and went to his room in the hope of quieting his mind, but the very pictures on the walls seemed to mock him. He sank into a chair, buried his face in his hands and mused feverishly: "Then Mazie is here. I thought I was thousands of miles away from her, and now I am so near—so very near. Ah! it all seems very cruel and heartless. I was trying so hard to forget her. And how beautiful she looked—poor Mazie! I wonder what brought her to the Place o' Pines? Why should she be selling roses? Perhaps it's not Mazie at all. But I must find out at once."

He rose hurriedly and left the room. He did not know whither he was going. His mind was agitated—restless as the storm-tossed ocean. Strange, piercing voices were

calling over the desolate fields of the past. They filled his soul with dread.

A few minutes later he passed through the hotel entrance. Jerry Gentles, the proprietor, met him on the steps. He was a pleasant-faced little man, barely five feet high and quite youthful-looking.

A few yards away, Sambo, one of the colored bell-boys, was digging a hole in the ground. Gentles had not seen the fellow at work until Gravenor drew his attention to him.

"What is he digging the hole for?" asked Arthur.

"Ah, the little fool! He's just ruining that plot of ground. Sambo—I say, Sambo! come here!"

Sambo threw down his shovel and obeyed his master's orders.

"What am de mattah, massa?" he asked kindly, his white teeth showing conspicuously between the prominent red lips.

"What are you digging there?"

"Diggin' in de groun', massa."

"Yes, but you're just ruining that lawn. What under the sun are you digging out that enormous hole for?"

The bell-boy rubbed his hands together, smacked his lips and answered with a certain air of pride: "Well, ye see, Massa Gentles, I read in de papah dat de govermint am goin'

to give ye a post of honah, an' dat hole am for ye to put it in. It am right here at de very entrance, ye see."

The two men laughed at poor Sambo's stupidity.

"Now, Sambo, be a good boy and close that hole as soon as possible," Gentles said to him, after he had explained to the negro's satisfaction the meaning of "post of honor."

"Well, well! dis pooh niggah am a fool, eh, massa?" Sambo said laughingly, as he crossed the lawn.

"Where, if I may ask, were you going, Gravenor?" inquired Gentles.

Arthur hardly knew what to answer. Presently a happy thought came to him and he replied: "I was thinking of going down town to purchase some roses for my sister."

"Why go down town when you can procure them here?"

"Where?" he asked, seizing the opportunity to continue his inquiries regarding Mazie.

"The Rose-Queen comes here twice daily. Let me see what time it is," he continued, looking at his watch. "Five o'clock. Ah! it's too late, she's already made her rounds. She will be here again this evening."

"I think I might as well wait, then," remarked Arthur. "The Rose-Queen does a good business here with her flowers?"

"Yes, and she's a pretty woman, too."

"Has she been here long?"

"About five years, I think."

"What's her real name?"

"Mazie Lescot."

"Mazie Lescot," repeated Arthur, slowly, a sudden paleness stealing into his face and a sigh breaking on his lips.

"She's a widow, you know," Gentles continued. "Her husband, Lawrence Lescot, was drowned two or three months ago. He was captain of the *El Dorado,* the steamer which went wrong in a storm one night. And since his death she has been selling roses."

"She is poor, then," Arthur said anxiously.

"Yes, quite. Lawrence built a cottage, but there's a heavy mortgage on it, and the poor woman's had a struggle."

At the sound of these words a fresh hope kindled in Arthur's heart.

"She has two children, a boy and a girl, to care for," Gentles continued. "Lawrence was a fine fellow, full of true valor, and many hearts mourned his death."

"Is Mrs. Lescot's home in the city?" Arthur asked, anxious to get all the particulars he could from the unsuspecting informant who was so willing to tell all he knew.

"Yes, about a mile from here, on Piccadilly street, in a neat white cottage with roses on

all sides of it. The place is easily found, and everybody knows the Rose-Queen."

The woman he had seen, then, was Mazie Lescot, and she was a widow and perhaps in want. In his heart Arthur could not help feeling glad that Lawrence was dead. He had been the only obstacle Fate had placed between himself and the woman he loved. Surely now Mazie would listen to his entreaties. Surely now she would be only too glad to accept his offers that would mean luxury and ease instead of misery and penury. And gladly his mind framed a beautiful picture. Afar off lay the past, shrouded in heavy, dark shadows, and over it all rose the future, radiant and resplendent with glory. With hopeful thoughts Arthur awaited the approaching evening and the forthcoming appearance of the Rose-Queen.

CHAPTER X.

The Meeting.

"O memories! O past that is!"
—*Eliot.*

WHEN Arthur reached his room some minutes later, he felt much easier. A heavy weight seemed to have been suddenly lifted from his heart. Muriel was overjoyed to find him in such good spirits.

"I am so glad to see you smiling again, Arthur," she said, placing her arm lovingly about his neck. "You really look your old self to-day. I was afraid you would never grow strong again, but now a new hope seems to be dawning. Arthur, I am so glad."

There was a rap at the door, and Signor Frescati entered.

"Ah, Miss Muriel," he remarked, "I see you have returned, and Mr. Arthur, I hope, is feeling better now."

"Yes, thank you, signor. I'm all right again," answered Gravenor.

"What does all this mean?" interrupted Muriel. "Have you been ill, Arthur? Has something happened to you? Speak, brother, speak!"

"Sister mine, calm yourself!" Arthur replied. "The signor and I were sitting on

the balcony this afternoon and a weak spell came over me. That was all. But I'm quite well again. I feel stronger now than I have since coming here."

Muriel never dreamed of Mazie Lescot's presence in the city. Up to the present she had not seen the Rose-Queen.

The hours glided on swiftly, and soon the city clock struck the hour of eight. Arthur rose from his chair somewhat nervously.

"I am going for a little walk, Muriel," he said at the door. "My head aches slightly."

"Wait, my dear, and I shall go with you."

"Not to-night, sister. I know you are interested in your new book. Besides, you are tired and the air is rather damp and chilly." Muriel's kindness of heart almost startled him. At that moment he wished her thousands of miles away.

"Would you like to go to the garden-recital this evening, Muriel? Signor Frescati is going to sing again," he added thoughtfully. Arthur wanted to know just what his sister's plans were. Mazie would be there selling roses, and he was most anxious to meet her alone.

"No, Arthur, I am very tired. I think I shall retire early. Kitty and I had a long walk. We took the car to one of the pine forests, and oh, it was glorious tramping through the woods!"

"I am sure it must have been great sport. Well, Muriel, don't worry about me. I shall be home in good time. Good-bye."

The customary evening concert at the Clarendon was to take place in the rich flower garden just outside of the hotel grounds. It was a pleasant spot in which to listen to delightful music. Hundreds of suspended electric lights gave the place an appearance of an enchanted fairyland. Already the guests were passing through the gates. These recitals were a special delight to the people—out there below the majestic yellow moon and the tranquil, brooding stars.

Arthur stole through the gate and took a seat under a lonely willow, quite a distance from the audience. He knew that the Rose-Queen would be passing there on her way out of the garden, and that he would not be the cynosure of many eyes.

At length the Rose-Queen arrived. From his secluded spot Arthur could see her plainly, disposing of her roses to many of the people in the audience. There was a rule that flowers were only to be sold before the concert, and this was rigidly enforced. Mazie was glad, for there were two children waiting anxiously for her at home, and she always hurried to them as quickly as possible. Now she was drawing nearer, and Arthur's heart beat rapidly. A strange feeling came over him—a

feeling of half joy, half fear. She wore a black dress, very plain yet most becoming. On her breast a golden cross sparkled brightly. Her face had not lost any of its former beauty, her cheeks were full of color and her eyes danced exultingly.

Presently she walked down the narrow aisle, gathering the few roses she had left under her arm, and made for home. Passing the willow where Arthur was sitting, she noticed the shadow of a man in the subdued light. Drawing nearer, she asked: "Any roses, sir? Two for a quarter."

The man's eyes stole to the ground.

"How many have you left?"

"About ten, sir."

"I'll take them all. Here's the money."

While she was busy making change Arthur rose from the bench. The moonlight shone full upon his face.

"Here's your change, thank you!" the Rose-Queen said gratefully, as she handed him the money. Then her eyes stole to his face for the first time. The woman staggered and could hardly believe her senses.

"Great heaven! Arthur Gravenor," she moaned, "what brings you here?"

"Mazie! Mazie!" Arthur cried. "I don't know, but God must have directed me."

The frightened woman threw her thin shawl over her shoulders. Having regained her

composure, she continued slowly: "I am sorry we should meet again. It seems so cruel —so hard. Go, go, Mr. Gravenor! leave me in peace! 'Tis getting late. I must away to my little ones."

She turned to go, but he held her back. Neither spoke for some time. The meeting had recalled bitter memories in both. Presently the recital commenced. A sweet, comforting soprano was singing a touching heart-song, and the words stole into their ears with double meaning:

"Let us begin, dear love, where we left off;
Tie up the broken threads of that old dream;
And go on happy as before; and seem
Lovers again, though all the world may scoff.
Let us forget the graves which lie between
Our parting and our meeting, and the tears
That rusted out the gold work of the years,
The frosts that fell upon our garden green."

Arthur whispered something into the Rose-Queen's ear. She turned like a frightened thing, and her cheeks flushed a beautiful crimson. Then she tried to tear herself from his grip.

"No, Mr. Gravenor," she exclaimed hotly, "it can never be! How dare you insult me thus! Ask me for my hand in marriage when the love for my dead husband is still great! Remember, Mr. Gravenor, that my love for him will outlive all the years."

"But, Mazie, think how you have to toil

and struggle now that the bread-winner's gone."

"That is nothing to me. If I continue to keep good health, I shall have nothing to fear. There are only three of us, and God will provide."

"Think of the home I could give you and your two children, Mazie." He loosened his grip and Mazie's arms swung to her side.

"It might mean comfort and all the luxury of living, but never happiness to me. No, Mr. Gravenor, I never could be happy with you. I told you so long ago, and I had hoped you would not approach me again."

"You have done me a great wrong, Mazie. You have ruined my life, when you might have helped me so easily, and, by heaven!" (he raised his clenched fist into the air) "I'll never forget or forgive you for it! And still you persist in crushing my advances?"

"Yes, and will persist just as long as there's life in this body, Mr. Gravenor. There is a great void between us. No man will ever be good enough to follow in Lawrence's footsteps."

Then she went, sobbing, down the narrow path that led from the garden.

"Curse her!" hissed Arthur in all the vehemence of anger. "Ah! I hate her—hate her!" he added bitterly.

Despair and jealousy stole into his soul and

recalled again his insane desires. Then in the moonlight he raised his face to the skies and spoke angrily: "By heaven, I swear I will make her suffer for this!"

That very evening, while under the influence of this strange mental excitement, Arthur wandered to the Lescot cottage. The curtain on one of the side windows was only half drawn.

For a moment his eyes wandered through the neat, cheerful room. A picture of Lawrence Lescot, hanging on the opposite wall, was the first object to meet his gaze. He could have torn it into a thousand shreds. Mazie sat at a table holding her head in her hands. Two happy-hearted children played upon the floor at her very feet. The little girl raised her pleasant face, and Arthur noticed she bore a strong resemblance to her mother.

"I'll make you suffer yet, Mazie Lescot," he whispered to himself. "You tore my heart to pieces and I shall tear yours. Some day you will return to find that the little girl is gone. I am going to steal her—steal her!"

CHAPTER XI.

A Voice in the Night.

"The air is full of hints of grief,
Strange voices touched with pain."
—*Aldrich.*

ARTHUR GRAVENOR returned to his rooms at the Clarendon with madness in his heart. The insane desire to do Mazie some great injustice preyed upon his mind continually, and he fairly exulted over his newly formulated plans to kidnap her little daughter. The debt would then be paid, he argued. But what was he to do with the stolen child? The thought gave him no little trouble. Finally he decided to take her back to Kempton with him—and then? He was puzzled, but at this moment he did not give the matter much thought.

Muriel waited long for her brother's footsteps that evening. She could not sleep. Something within seemed to tell her to remain awake. Several times she stole over to his room, and each time she found his bed empty.

Arthur had no sooner entered than his sister was again at the door.

"At last! at last!" she exclaimed. "I have been worrying all evening about you. Where have you been this long while? The concert was over fully two hours ago."

"Oh, I met a dear friend in the garden, and we had a long chat renewing old times."

Had Muriel known who the friend had been, she could have accounted more easily for Arthur's silence and his troubled, anxious look.

"Arthur, you look so worried and pale!" Muriel said, much concerned. "Come, tell me what is the matter?"

"Nothing much," he answered wearily, "but I am growing tired of this place, and I am anxious to get back to my mill and Kempton. We've been here several weeks, and that's long enough, I think."

"What do you mean, Arthur? Do you mean that you care to stay here no longer? Oh, I am so sorry! You were just beginning to gain. Only to-night you looked the picture of health."

"I must get away. Everything seems to haunt me. These old, mean thoughts are back again, killing me by inches. I think I would feel better looking after my work at the mill. Really, Muriel, I often feel as if I were going crazy."

"Oh, brother, do not speak so! It hurts me. You do not know how anxious I am to see you get strong. Come, cheer up, for my sake, do!" She spoke, overcome with emotion, as the tears filled her eyes with mist. "You must try to rise above these gloomy

thoughts. Remember, Arthur, there's a God in heaven who will be only too willing to give you strength and peace. Go to Him, and He will help you in all your trouble."

"Muriel, I am not worthy of His love, for I have murmured against Him almost daily. When I look upon other brightened lives I feel the darkness of mine. Why should God have denied me so much happiness?"

"It was all for a purpose," Muriel answered comfortingly. "God knows best, Arthur. So be patient."

"I would just as lief be dead, Muriel," he continued despairingly, "as to drag out such a miserable existence. But we must get away from this place, and that very soon. By the way, Muriel, I am thinking of taking a little child back to Kempton with me. I may adopt one—a sweet little girl. She will help to bring some brightness into Bleur House. What do you think of the plan?"

Arthur thought it best to refer thus to the Lescot child, lest Muriel might regard its sudden appearance with a degree of suspicion.

"I think it would be glorious!" exclaimed Muriel. "It would be such company for Aunt Hawkins and myself. And you say the little thing is pretty—the sweet dear!"

"Yes, she is very pretty."

"How old is she?"

"I would imagine about three or four."

"By all means adopt her, Arthur. How did you happen to hear of her?"

"One afternoon I met the woman who has taken care of the child since her parents died. She was very poor and begged me to adopt her."

Muriel's eyes stole to the table. The roses which Arthur had bought at the evening concert had been thrown upon it carelessly.

"Where did you get the pretty flowers, dear?" she asked quickly, as she rose from her chair. My! Are they not beautiful? Where did you get them?"

"At the evening concert. A woman sold them to me."

"Was it the Rose-Queen?"

Arthur's face colored slightly.

"Yes, my darling," he answered in a trembling voice.

"They say she is very pretty. I have not yet seen her, but I should like to before I leave the island."

Arthur was just then hoping that his sister might never see her face. He would take good care, however, that they would leave the island just as soon as possible. How could he best steal the child? That was the question now troubling his mind.

"Take the roses with you, Muriel," he said as she left the room. "I hate red roses."

"Thank you!" she replied, "'Tis getting

late, Arthur, and I hope you will be in bed before many minutes. I am sure to-morrow you will feel better."

"Will you promise, Muriel, to leave the Place o' Pines when I am ready?"

"I promise, dear. Good-night!"

For some time Arthur sat in his chair thinking. Then he rose, took off his coat and vest and donned his dressing-gown. The night-voice of the mighty ocean stole into his room. It sounded pitifully—like the moan of a man in the throes of agony, almost like a death-cry, full of earnest pleading. The beach twisted itself along the water-front a half-mile or so—a sheet of silver light under the quiet, pale stars. It looked deserted at this hour. All the merry voices that had joined in the waves' jubilant chorus were now silent. The night had no particular fascination for him. It made his already lonely heart all the lonelier; so he threw himself upon his bed and covered his eyes with his arm as if to shut out a haunting picture. He tried to sleep, but it was useless. His thoughts would not let him. They were continually battling for the mastery. Presently they led him back to the concert-garden. Again Mazie rose before him, but now her face had the cold look of death upon it. Her cheeks were cheerless, her eyes sunless. She was dead to him forever—dead!

dead! Again that haunting soprano voice echoed through his troubled memory.

"Let us forget the graves which lie between
Our parting and our meeting, and the tears
That rusted out the gold work of our years,
The frosts that fell upon our garden green."

"How can I forget?" he moaned in anguish. "God, teach me to forget, if such a thing is possible! I am afraid this will yet drive me mad."

The city clock struck the hour of midnight —twelve strong, haunting strokes that sounded to Arthur like a death-knell. After a few minutes, sleep came to his eyes and his mind enjoyed a rest for an hour or so.

Then he raised himself in bed like one startled out of a terrible dream.

"I thought I heard someone calling," he said to himself.

Slowly and faintly a voice sounded outside: "Help! help!"

He sprang to the window. What appeared to be a bundle of rags was moving about on the hard pavement below. A few minutes later he was beside the writhing form.

"What is the matter, good woman?" he asked kindly.

The pinched, wan face looked up at him.

"I've pain—great pain, sir. Give me whiskey—whiskey! Ugh! it'll kill me—kill me! Oh, the pain—the pain!"

Arthur ran to his room.

"Here's some whiskey," he said, a minute later, "drink it!"

Gently lifting the woman's head he placed the small glass to her lips.

Half an hour later the woman was herself again. A policeman had in the meantime arrived. Passing on his rounds he had noticed the two people.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"The woman was taken sick. I heard her cries for help in my room upstairs, so I rushed to her side. She has had some whiskey and feels better now."

The policeman bent over the suffering woman and at once recognized her face.

"Ah, it's you, Mad Nance! What's the matter?" he asked. "Another attack of colic, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, 'twas a bad one this time," she replied slowly, "'Twill be the death of me yet."

"Shall I get the ambulance for her?" Arthur asked kindly, as she rose to her feet.

"Don't bother," she answered. "The pain's over now, and I'm just as good as ever. So good-night, gentlemen—and thank you!"

Slowly she stumbled along the smooth pavement on her homeward journey. When she was gone Arthur asked:

"Who is this strange woman?"

"That is Mad Nance. Nance Drowler is her right name. I have often seen her in these attacks."

"What is she doing out at this late hour?"

"I hardly know, but it is for no good purpose. Mad Nance is one of the worst characters we have on the island. She is said to have been the instigator of several crimes, but the hands of the law have never been able to reach her. She is as sly and cunning as a fox and has outwitted many a detective. Everybody knows Mad Nance. She is very peculiar. Some even think she is half insane. Hence they've called her Mad Nance. But, do you know, she has brains enough left to fool us all. And she has done it these many years, too."

At that moment an idea came to Gravenor's mind. Mad Nance was the sort of person he was looking for. The wretch would, in all probability, help him to steal that child from the Lescot cottage. An offer of gold would possibly be tempting bait for the old hag. He determined to find out just where the woman lived.

"She looked like a strange woman to me," he remarked. "There were so many hard lines on her starved, wrinkled face."

"That woman will do anything for money, they say," the policeman continued. "It is

rumored she has plenty of it, even though she is clad so miserably."

"Has she lived here long?"

"Almost all her life."

"Do you think, sick as she was, she will reach her destination to-night?"

"Yes. She has done so repeatedly. Besides it is not very far. Her house stands on the outskirts of the city—past Hortley and Lancaster road. It is the only house at that particular spot."

"Past Hortley and Lancaster road," Arthur mused as he lay in bed twenty minutes later. "This strange woman came across my path at a very opportune time. And now for the stealing of the child! Ah, Mazie," he exclaimed loudly, "the days of retribution have come at last!"

CHAPTER XII.

Mad Nance.

"Oh! think what anxious moments pass between
The birth of plots and their last fatal periods."
—*Addison.*

ARTHUR lay upon his bed, tossing about nervously. The city clock struck the hour of two, and sleep was still afar off. The sound of the chimes pierced his heart. Like a frightened being he sprang from his bed and hurried to the window. All the brightness of moonlight had vanished. Dark, ominous clouds were filling the sky.

"Past Hortley and Lancaster road," he whispered to himself. "How would it be to visit Mad Nance now, under cover of darkness, and arrange the plot? No one would see me. The city seems quite dark. The sky is growing blacker, and it will take hours before the moon appears. I shall get ready and—"

Just then there were sounds of footsteps in the hall.

"I am sure it is Muriel," he whispered, "coming to see if I am fast asleep." Quickly he jumped into bed, pulled the covers over him, closed his eyes and simulated sleep.

Then the door opened and Muriel glided in noiselessly, a lighted candle in her hand, and approached the bed.

"He is sleeping—thank God! Poor boy!"

Slowly and silently she left the room and closed the door behind her. When she was gone Arthur rose from his bed. His sister's kindly solicitude had touched him deeply.

"Poor Muriel! Dear child!" he cried. "I am so wicked and you are so good. Oh, you are not for this world!" A few tears came to his eyes, but he brushed them away quickly.

A half hour later he was hurrying through the streets in the darkness, in the direction of Mad Nance's rendezvous. On his way he passed Piccadilly street. A light at the far corner made it very bright. He halted for a moment. Yes, there stood Mazie's cottage. A light shone in the window. What did it mean? His heart almost stood still. Something urged him to steal up to the window. He did so cautiously, and, raising himself on tiptoe, looked in.

To his surprise, he saw two women engaged in earnest conversation. In a bed in the corner slept the two children. Directly opposite stood Mazie's bed. Arthur drew nearer and listened eagerly for every word that escaped the speaker's lips.

"It is really too bad, Mrs. Lescot, to call

you out of bed at this time of the morning," remarked the elderly woman, who lived a block or two away. "Jim has taken very ill. The doctor says he has pneumonia. He called last evening. The poor fellow is getting worse. He is delirious now, and I hardly know what to do. I wondered whether you would come over and stay with me?"

"Certainly, Mrs. Sorel."

"I thought you would. I shall send Mary to stay with the children."

Mary was a girl of about twelve, a deaf-mute. She had lost her speech and hearing during a sickness in early childhood.

"I telegraphed my daughter, Mamie, last evening," Mrs. Sorel continued. "She is nursing in Fenton, but it will take two days for her to come."

Mrs. Sorel and Mazie Lescot had been good friends for years. The former had helped the latter many a time to tide over great difficulties, and Mazie naturally felt only too happy to be able to do her this small service.

"You need not worry, Mrs. Sorel," exclaimed Mazie. "I will go along with you now, and to-morrow I will stay all night, so that you will be able to rest a while. You look very tired. I shall feel contented so long as Mary is with the children."

"Thank you! I shall go home and bring Mary, and then you can return with me."

"This is fortunate," muttered Gravenor outside, his face aglow with satisfaction. "Everything is unravelling nicely, and now for a quiet talk with Mad Nance."

He hurried on anxiously, his brain awhirl with strange excitement. Soon he was crossing Lancaster road. The moon peeped for a few minutes through a rift of gray clouds, just long enough for him to recognize his surroundings. Yes, this was Lancaster road. He could read the name plainly on one of the telegraph posts. A few yards away he discovered a narrow little path that led to a house beyond. He could only see the roof. The house seemed to be hidden behind a number of pine trees. It was a lonely place for a human being to live in. There was not another house in sight as far as eye could reach. A miserable, small brook wound snake-like through the tall grass. Now and then one heard the lonely croak of a frog in the green, stagnant marshes. Not a breath of wind disturbed the heavy atmosphere, which was almost suffocating. The whole place seemed to reek of death.

Arthur walked nervously up the lonely path. He took a red wig and beard out of his pocket and donned the strange disguise. Mad Nance was not to recognize him. Presently he stood at the door of the dwelling—a plain, dilapidated building. He rapped,

and waited a few minutes, but no answer. He rapped a second time; still no answer. Again his fingers sounded on the door. This time a voice called from within:

"What's wanted? Who comes here?"

"A traveller, weary and worn. Will you let him in?"

"Be he friend or enemy?"

"Friend, to be sure."

Then the heavy door opened, and Arthur entered the house.

"Be seated, man," the old wretch whined, as she strode into an adjoining room. "I'll see you in a minute."

In the meantime Arthur's eyes took in the surroundings. The room was scantily furnished. The walls were bare and dirty. An old rickety table, two chairs and a small, rusty stove were all that the room contained. Upon the table stood an empty flask and a half loaf of dry bread. In the window stood a withered geranium that had died of inanition.

Presently Mad Nance re-entered the room with a slow, sly walk. There was a suspicious look in her piercing black eyes. She looked like a woman who was at life's journey's end; and yet she was only in the forties. Poorly nourished, it was surprising how the heart could go on beating in so wasted a body. Yet her voice was loud and strong—one that

would have done an orator justice. On her face was written the story of her life—a record of debauchery and crime. It was a dried-up, yellow-looking face, the large cheek-bones showing prominently. Her lips were almost bloodless, and when she spoke one could see that a number of her teeth were missing. Her steel-gray hair hung in great disorder about her face. She looked like one in the last stages of dementia. When she walked a slight limp was noticeable in her gait, and in her back on the right-hand side a small hump showed plainly. An old black dress, fastened together in many places with safety-pins, covered her miserable, thin body.

Rubbing her hands together somewhat nervously, she took a seat directly opposite Arthur. Then her searching, piercing eyes sought his face. They almost startled him.

"So you came here for a night's lodging?" she said suspiciously. "It seems strange that such a well-dressed man as you should care to stay overnight in such a hovel as this. Besides—"

"Never mind, Nance," Arthur interrupted, "you see I know your name—that was only an invention of mine to get into the house. I shall tell you now what brings me here. Remember, I did not come to do you harm. I come to give you a chance of earning some money."

Mad Nance's face brightened and a smile came to her eyes. "Really!" she exclaimed, "I love money. It's my god." She wrinkled her face for a moment, and her decayed teeth showed conspicuously. Then she fell into a fit of coughing. Arthur was afraid that it might prostrate her. It seemed to shake every bone of her body.

"I would not wish this cough to the devil," she gasped. "It will flatten me out one of these days. But what's the difference? Then Mad Nance's sufferings will be over. Tell me what brings you here!" she cried. "Speak up!" She rose from her chair and walked up and down the room.

"I want you to do something—to steal something for me. I shall pay you well for it."

"Steal something? Steal what?" she asked eagerly, standing still for a moment.

"I want you to steal a child. Now, don't get scared. It can be managed easily. Will you do it?"

"What'll the job bring me?"

"Two hundred dollars!"

"Two hundred dollars!" she cried lustily. "Say, that'll pay our bills, Mag, old girl, eh?"

"Bet your life, Nance," echoed Mag's voice from an adjoining room. Mag was her intimate friend, her sister in crime and degradation.

"Where does the child stay?" queried Nance.

"At 78 Piccadilly—Mrs. Lescot's cottage."

"Ah, yes, I know the place. Lescot? Lescot? Then it is the Rose-Queen's child."

"Yes, that's the woman."

"Why do you seek to ruin the Rose-Queen? She is so beautiful and harmless."

"That is no concern of yours," Arthur interrupted. "Do you want to earn the money? This question requires your answer, Nance."

"Certainly, I do."

Again the cold, hardened face wrinkled into smiles.

"Well, stranger," she continued, "how shall I go about all this? Remember, I am a poor-looking specimen of humanity, but I'm not one of the kind that fears the gallows or the prison, sir."

The proffered two hundred was tempting bait for Mad Nance, who had neither heart nor conscience. She had nibbled too often at the golden hook of crime to fear capture now.

"Don't think hard of me," she muttered. "Nance Drowler was a decent, pure-hearted woman at one time, but Mag Snell and a few other black souls pulled her on to the road of perdition."

"You lie, Nance," shrieked Mag, "you lie! It was whiskey that did it—hot, burning whiskey!"

In the meantime, Mad Nance, tired of walking, seated herself in her chair and held her head in her hand.

"How am I to manage this?" she asked again, a troubled look in her wild, demoniacal eyes.

"Listen!" Gravenor answered, drawing closer. "To-morrow night the Rose-Queen will not be at home. She is going to spend the night nursing a sick man—the husband of an old friend of hers. A little girl, a daughter of the sick man, is going to remain over night with the two children until the Rose-Queen returns in the morning. So, you see, there will be no obstacle. But you had better disguise yourself."

"That will be an easy matter. I have plenty of material here that has helped me to overcome greater difficulties. You said there were two children," the woman repeated slowly. "Which one shall I steal?"

"The little girl. Her bed stands in the corner of the room. You can make no mistake. The children will likely be fast asleep. You can enter the Lescot house through the kitchen window. I noticed it was open but an hour ago when I passed. When the child is in your arms, hurry to the bend in the river where the white boathouse stands. I shall be waiting there for you. Now this is all I ask you to do. Will you promise to keep all this

a secret? One word from you would cost both of us our lives."

"I promise! I promise!" the old wretch whispered faintly.

"I may trust you, then," Gravenor said, his lips trembling visibly.

"Trust me, man?" She spoke angrily. "Why, certainly, that's what you are paying me for. My lips will be sealed forever. Depend upon it!"

"Come, then, and I shall pay you," he said abruptly. She staggered to the table, dragging her foot after her. Then another paroxysm of coughing caught her.

Gravenor threw his purse on the table, after having taken from it a roll of bills. While he was busy counting the money Mad Nance's eyes wandered to the table. Then they stole to the leather purse, upon which was stamped her tempter's name in large golden letters: it read—

"ARTHUR GRAVENOR,
Kempton."

"I must not forget the name," she mused. "I shall write it down somewhere for future reference."

"Here's half of the money," he said, as he handed her the bills. "Count it! The bal-

ance will be paid when the child is placed safely in my arms."

Mad Nance's long, bony fingers grasped the bills.

"One hundred dollars!" she said proudly, when she had finished her counting. "It's correct, sir. Mag and I will drink your health when you're gone, sir."

"At what hour shall I meet you at the bend in the river with the child?"

"About an hour after midnight."

"I'll be there with the prize," she answered jovially. "You can depend upon me. Nance Drowler will not be found wanting when the proper time arrives. I swear—I swear it!"

And with these words ringing in his ears, Gravenor left that house of sin, his troubled face turned towards the morning which still lingered babelike in the night's tender, soothing mother arms.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Stolen Child.

"Who can foretell for what high cause
This darling of the gods was born?"
—*Marvell.*

WHEN Gravenor reached the hotel the clock in his room pointed the hour of four. Already the dawn was creeping over the eastern hills with his crimson cloak about him, and the birds were beginning to stir in the trees. Arthur felt tired, very tired, and he was glad to be able to stretch himself on his soft, comfortable bed. Soon he was fast asleep.

The past few hours had been trying ones for him, but he gloried in the deed that was about to be done. Mazie had ruined his life, he argued, and now he had a perfect right to ruin hers. Why had he not called upon God to comfort him in those dark hours? Now it was too late—too late! The last vestige of goodness had crumbled away. He was fast losing his mind. His thoughts no longer sought the spiritual. They clung only to things earthly, and were changed and dirt-bespattered. The influence of religion was missing. His mind was filled with mad im-

pulses, wild desires. He was now Arthur Gravenor, hero of his own fancies, wronged man of the world, turned conqueror at last. Had he been in his right senses, his heart would never have dictated the details of such a crime, but when one's mind becomes diseased and wanders along the same narrow groove, all interference and pleading is useless. What did it matter to him now whether the mill at Kempton was running or not? What did it matter whether Aunt Hawkins inquired after him, saying this or that, or whether Muriel worried about his condition? He cared for nothing, now that he was about to ruin the life of the woman he had once loved. To drive a dagger into her heart was a satisfaction his hungry, jealous soul revelled in.

Several times he woke in his sleep with nervous startings and called out laughingly: "The hour is come, and Arthur Gravenor triumphs at last!"

About nine Muriel stole to his bedside. He had slept soundly for some time.

"I am so glad that you slept so well, dear," she said, as she brushed the hair from his forehead. "See, I have brought you a cup of cocoa. It will refresh you."

"Thanks, Muriel, it is very good of you."

Muriel could not help noticing the vacant stare in her brother's eyes. She also per-

ceived that his face had become thinner, but she said nothing.

"Have you received the morning's paper?" the girl asked gently.

"Yes, dear, it is there on the table. The hour has come, they say, and I am—"

"What is that you are saying?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing, sister."

His mind had wandered along the groove of his old delusion, but he suddenly summoned his senses.

"What's this?" exclaimed Muriel as she picked a red wig and beard from off the table, while looking for the morning paper.

Arthur bit his lips and a crimson blush stole to his face. He had placed the disguise there, thoughtlessly, upon his return from Mad Nance's rendezvous. Ah! Muriel had discovered him—what was he to say? Instantly the words came to him.

"It belongs to one of the actors at the Olympia, Muriel," he answered. "I am to take it back to Madam Amyot's at Kempton for him. Some changes have to be made."

Muriel placed it on the table, settled herself in a comfortable armchair and began reading the paper.

After a few minutes' silence her brother began:

"Muriel, we shall have to pack our trunks to-day."

"Why so soon, brother?"

"We leave to-morrow morning at one-thirty. The steamer arrives about one o'clock, and it is generally on time."

"This is sudden!" exclaimed Muriel, somewhat disappointed, "and all our plans for the week upset! Could you not remain another week?"

"No, I must away. Every day brings me more suffering. So ask no questions, but be contented, like a good girl!"

"Very well, we shall get ready," the girl remarked, a touch of unwillingness in her answer. She knew it was best not to cross her brother in any of his plans now, for she could not help feeling that hourly almost he was becoming a changed man. She was beginning to divine in him another self—a selfish, scheming spirit—and her heart ached, for she knew not what the outcome of it all might be. So she and Kitty set to work to prepare for the homeward journey.

Later in the day Arthur said to his sister: "Muriel, I have decided to adopt that little, fatherless girl and take her back to Kempton with me."

"Where is she? I would so like to see her."

"You shall see her soon. I shall go for her before we sail. It would be too much to ask the woman to bring her here now."

" By all means go for her. Oh, it will just be lovely to have such an angel with us always at Bleur House."

About midnight Mad Nance, deeply disguised, stumbled out of her cottage. Mag stood at the door lighting the way with a candle.

" Make a good job of it!" the latter called out to her, " and for heaven's sake look out for the police, or you'll swing, you'll swing!"

It did not take Mad Nance long to reach her destination. It was lucky for her that not a star was visible in the wide expanse of heaven. When the child was safely in her arms she would cross a narrow street not far away, and wend her way along the water's edge to the spot where the stranger was to meet her. All would be darkness there. No one would discover her. Then, by another secret road, she would hurry home through the woods. She had often gone this way when on some errand of crime.

Mad Nance tiptoed stealthily to the window. The blind was partly drawn, and she could see clearly into the bedchamber. A light stood on a table, flickering quietly. In one corner of the small room stood the bed in which Mary Sorel, the deaf-mute, was sleeping; in the other the two children smiled in peaceful slumbers.

" Everything's nice and quiet now," she

said to herself, "and I'll get through that kitchen window."

She turned and hurried around the corner of the house.

"Good, it's open!" she whispered.

The next moment she stood in the Lescot cottage, facing the three sleepers. She tiptoed over to the children's bed. Then her nose began to bleed. Some of the blood trickled onto the white bed cover. When the bleeding ceased she put her hands upon the sleeping girl and lifted her into the blanket on the bed. Just then Mary Sorel stirred, stretched herself and yawned slightly. Mad Nance's fingers quickly turned down the light. She waited a minute. The child was sleeping soundly in her arms. When the deaf-mute was settled again she turned up the light, hurried out of the room, and, opening a side door, disappeared into the darkness of the night.

On and on Mad Nance stumbled through the darkness, over uneven ground, until she reached the bank of the river. The child was now wide awake. The sound of the waves stole into the woman's ears, like so many voices accusing her of the crime she had just committed. But her conscience was hardened and she paid no attention to them.

Presently the child began to cry.

"Mama, mama!" she called sorrowfully.

The old wretch drew a soiled handkerchief out of her pocket and stuffed it into the child's mouth.

"There, you little devil! there's a sugar plum for you," she whined heartlessly.

Soon she reached the bend in the river where Arthur, in his red wig and beard, stood awaiting her.

"I see you are on time, Nance," he said, as she stumbled up to him in the darkness. Thereupon he lit a candle.

"You can bet your life," she continued, "when Nance Drowler takes it into her head to do anything she does it up to the queen's taste."

"Is the child sleeping?" Gravenor asked nervously.

"No, she's been crying most of the way, so I stuffed a rag into her nasty little mouth," Nance said breathlessly.

"I see she is thinly clad. Here, woman, are some clothes for her." Arthur had sent Muriel to purchase them in the early afternoon.

Constance cried loudly, her cheeks bathed in tears: "Mama! mama!" But neither paid any attention to the little one.

"Is the child dressed now?" the man asked excitedly. "I'll soon hush that crying. By the way, here is the other hundred," he said, as he gave her the money.

Thereupon Mad Nance handed him the child. He poured a clear liquid upon a tiny handkerchief which he held to her nose, and then remarked: "There, that will send you to fairyland in a few minutes."

Quickly the child's cry died into a sob, then into a sigh. Soon the breath came slowly and quietly.

"I must go," Gravenor exclaimed. "The steamer will be pulling out shortly. Remember, woman, that you keep this a secret! Remember it will cost you your life if you should ever reveal it."

Mad Nance sank upon her knees, grabbed his arm and moaned: "I swear that I shall keep this secret until my dying day—my dying day!" she repeated.

Arthur threw the burning candle into the water. It hissed for a moment and then disappeared. Turning, he said good-bye to the woman whom he hoped he would never meet in this life again.

Thus the two little children of Mazie Lescot were parted—the little son still fast asleep in his cosy bed, and the daughter carried far away into another country among strangers.

Arthur reached the steamer just a few minutes before it pulled out of the wharf. Hundreds of guests were leaving that morning. Quickly he hurried to the stateroom where Kitty and Muriel awaited his return.

When the door opened the two women rushed over to meet him.

"Let's see the little dear!" cried Muriel.

Arthur handed her the child.

She lifted the heavy blanket and presently the child's beautiful face greeted her.

"She is just a perfect dear," observed Muriel.

"The little darling!" exclaimed Kitty. "She seems just fresh from the hand of God."

Muriel kissed the little face.

"I smell chloroform on the child," she remarked nervously.

Arthur's face betrayed signs of fear.

"That's not chloroform," he replied. "The lady told me the child had a bad cold on the chest, and that she had rubbed it well with some liniment."

"The poor little dear! How soundly she sleeps."

Arthur was hoping that the child might sleep for hours, so as not to arouse the suspicions of the passengers.

"Oh, I almost forgot! What is the child's name?" asked Muriel.

Arthur was on the verge of answering, "Constance." Then a strange light came to his eyes and he whispered, "Gracia."

"Gracia," repeated Muriel, thoughtfully. "What a pretty name!"

"It is not too pretty for the sweet pet," chimed in Kitty.

"I think you had better lay the child down, Muriel," commanded Arthur. "She is sleeping so nicely, it would be a pity to wake her."

When, later, the steamer was speeding over the blue waters, a feeling of remorse stole into Arthur Gravenor's heart and he murmured to himself. "O God! what have I done? Have I fallen so low? I fear I shall never be able to rise again. After all it is Mazie Lescot's child—and now, alas! it seems so very cruel, oh, so heartless! God forgive—forgive me!"

But the voice of the angry ocean, restless and vast, alone thundered in his ears.

In that moment of introspection Arthur Gravenor had realized the gravity of his crime; but it was too late to turn back.

CHAPTER XIV.

In the House of Pain.

" There is no fireside, howsoe'er defended,
But has one vacant chair."

—*Longfellow.*

WHEN Mazie Lescot returned to her home early in the morning she was surprised to find the kitchen door wide open. Hurriedly she ran into the house, with strange misgivings in her heart. The sitting-room was just as she had left it, and from the adjoining room came the breathing of the sleepers. Again she passed through the kitchen door into the open air. Noticing fresh footsteps on the ground, she traced them to the street, where she lost track of them. She was greatly excited. Her heart beat wildly within her and her breath came in interruptions. Retracing her footsteps, she noticed some glittering object lying before her on the wet ground. Bending down, she picked it up. It was a tiny cross of gold with two initials, " C. L.", upon it.

" Great heavens!" she shrieked, " it is Constance's little golden cross—her father's last birthday gift to her. Only last night I tied it round the child's neck. I wonder how it ever got out here!"

Back to the children's room the mother ran, wild distraction in her eyes. Feeling now that the worst had come, she hurried to the children's bed. The boy was still sleeping soundly. Constance was missing. A wild cry escaped her lips. Then she sank to the floor, her heart breaking with convulsive sobs. In a minute she was on her feet again, her face white as death, and in her eyes the sorrow that was too deep for speech.

"Constance! Constance—child! Where are you?" Her cry sounded loudly through the room, and presently the little boy awoke. He raised himself in bed, rubbed his eyes and yawned. Mary Sorel also woke, and, seeing Mrs. Lescot shedding bitter tears, she wondered what it all meant.

"Where is Constance? Speak, for God's sake, child!" the mother commanded the boy.

The boy looked at his mother and then at the empty place in the bed.

"I don't know, mama," the child sobbed. "I dust woke now, an' I heard no noise all night." Then he called: "Tonstance! Tonstance! tum to yer brudder!"

The deaf-mute's eyes stole from the empty bed to the woman's face.

"Where is Constance, Mary? Tell me! Tell me! Did you hear anything during the night?"

Mary seemed to understand what the

trouble was all about. She pointed to the empty place in bed and tried to speak, but she could not. The sad silences which God had given her still lingered upon her lips.

Mrs. Lescot's eyes stole to the white blanket on the bed. She bent over and examined it more closely.

"Great heavens!" she shrieked, "there is blood upon it. Constance has been murdered—murdered! See—there's also blood here!" she moaned as her eyes stole to the floor.

The little boy looked at his mother, his frightened face all sadness. Mary Sorel's eyes, too, were filling with tears. She seemed to understand.

Mrs. Lescot grew weak and sank upon her knees a second time. She folded her hands and, for a moment, prayed fervently. Then she rose and threw a shawl over her shoulders. "Stay here, children," she cried, "I'll not be gone long."

As she passed out into the quiet morning air the sound of her sobs stole back into the little room. From door to door the distracted mother ran, begging the neighbors to come to her aid and help find the missing child. In a few minutes scores of kindly people poured into the Lescot home. The men stood around, surveyed the surroundings and argued

and pondered, and the women tried to speak consoling words to the grief-stricken mother.

"Constance! Constance!" she sobbed continually, "why did I ever leave you over night? You poor little thing! O God! I shall go mad if my Constance is dead!"

Sympathetic friends would whisper messages of hope into her ears. Her eyes would brighten a moment, then the look of sorrow would return.

Crowds of men and women and children thronged to the spot, many through sympathy, some through sheer curiosity . The morning glided into the afternoon; and still there was no clue to the mysterious crime. The detectives were utterly at sea. No one in the neighborhood had heard or seen anything; and the only two who might have been witnesses to the crime could not give assistance. The boy was only a child of four, and Mary Sorel, alas! was a deaf-mute.

The strange mystery was the general topic of conversation. On the street corners, in the shops and in the hotels, originated all manner of theories. In the hearts of hundreds genuine pity was felt for the Rose-Queen. The people were hopeful that before sunset a gleam of light would be thrown upon the mysterious tragedy. The detectives, however, were the most hopeless of all. In their hearts they felt that the murderer—for they had

expressed the opinion freely that it had been a case of murder—would not be caught for weeks or months—perhaps never. They had not the merest shred of a clue to work on.

That evening, in their secluded room, Mad Nance and Mag, her colleague in crime, were chatting briskly. Upon a table in front of them stood glasses and a few bottles of whiskey. The air reeked with the odor of the intoxicant.

"Come, drink, Nance!" cried out the jovial Mag in her drunken stupor. "There's lots more here—enough to soak your wrinkled hide. That two hundred comes in handy, eh?"

"Pour me out another mouthful," Nance demanded. Raising the glass to her lips, she said: "Ah, 'tis delightful stuff—fit drink for a king. And how glorious to feel that one owned the whole world! By the way, Mag, did you see the evening paper?"

"Yes, I'll get it for you."

The woman rose from her chair, staggered into the adjoining room and soon returned, paper in hand. Seating herself, Mad Nance asked nervously: "Any mention of the Lescot affair?"

"I don't know, but 'twill take only a minute to see."

There was a momentary silence, and Mag's

small, bloodshot eyes wandered over the paper.

"Ah, yes," she exclaimed. "Here is a half page. Shall I read the headlines?"

"Yes. Go on."

Mag drew a little closer to the candle light, wrinkled her forehead, placed the newspaper at the right distance from her eyes and then proceeded:

"The Lescot Tragedy—Three-Year-Old Child Missing—Foul Play Suspected—"

"Great heavens!" burst in Mad Nance, somewhat frightened. "Go on!"

"Child Probably Murdered—Drops of Blood Found on Blanket and on the Floor—"

"Drops of blood?" Nance interrupted. "Ah, the old fools! As I was about to lift the child out of bed my nose began to bleed, and some of the blood must have trickled onto the blanket and the floor. Read on!"

"Here it says," Mag repeated, "the murderer is supposed to have carried the child out of the house, as a golden cross, bearing the latter's initials, was found in the path that led to the road."

"I remember quite well seeing the cross on the child's breast. It must have been torn off in my excitement when I carried her in my arms."

"Fresh footprints," Mag read slowly, "have been traced from the kitchen door to

the road. They are thought to be those of the murderer. Measurement proves conclusively that they are the footprints of a man and that he must have worn a No. 11 shoe."

Thereupon Mag gave vent to an outburst of laughter.

"Pretty hard on you, Nance. Think of wearing a No. 11 shoe. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is there any more startling news?" anxiously asked Mad Nance.

"Yes, listen! The Detectives Spend a Day in Vain. Still no Clue. They Fear It Is a Hopeless Case."

"No clue—fear it is a hopeless case," repeated Mad Nance. "Ah, I'm glad. Come, fill up the glasses again! Never mind reading the rest. That 'no clue' is enough for me."

The glasses were filled, and again the two women drained them.

"Listen, Nance!" Mag began, after a few minutes, "here is what Detective Griven thinks of the case. I know it will interest you. 'Detective Griven feared that the tragedy would never be cleared up, that the guilty party had taken every precaution so as not to leave any clue to the crime.' Poor old Grivy! Many's the time you've been fooled."

"Oh, Griven be hanged!" hissed Nance, indignantly, "the old woman! He'd better

be doing fancy-work and peeling potatoes than hunting murderers. Yes, I've outwitted him many a time. This Lescot affair's another instance."

Had the detectives been listening at the wretch's window, they would have discovered a clue to the mystery, but they had not looked with suspicion upon the little cottage on the Wortley and Lancaster road, and its two wicked occupants. Mad Nance could feel secure. So far, her name had not been implicated in the mysterious affair, and she hoped that the unexpected would not happen.

CHAPTER XV.

Seeing the Daylight.

"Death is dawn,
The waking from a weary night
Of fevers unto truth and light."
—*Joaquin Miller.*

IT had been the longest, dreariest day in Mrs. Lescot's life. People came and went continually. All the excitement had been too much for the suffering woman. In the afternoon a doctor was hastily summoned. He found her heart quite weak, and ordered entire rest. All day, therefore, she lay in bed; but she could not sleep. There was a heavy weight upon her brain. She had thought dreadful thoughts, and they stood before her continually with hideous, mocking faces. In the early morning she had expected that her child would be restored to her within a short time. Now that evening had set in and there had been so much talk of murder, hope had given way. One by one her friends left the house. Several still lingered, loath to depart, and declared they would stay over night; but she begged them not to remain, as it was not necessary.

"I am very tired," she said, "and I know I shall sleep. It cannot be otherwise. I shall try to worry as little as possible."

So they bade her good-night, and she and her little son were alone. It was very lonely without Constance, and, as Mrs. Lescot looked at the empty place in the bed, hot, bitter tears came to her and again she wept. Shortly after, she retired for the night, her son nestling sweetly in her arms. Sleep—soothing, tender sleep—seemed to be far away. Her mind was being tossed about in the frenzy of wild imaginings. Very soon she experienced difficulty in breathing. At times this necessitated her sitting up in bed. Through the growing hours Mrs. Lescot's thoughts dwelt continually upon her lost child. Vainly her brain had searched for a clue that might lead her out of darkness into light; vainly she had asked the detectives all manner of questions, hoping to receive the consoling answer that, at last, they had tracked the murderer.

The clock struck the hour of midnight—and still no sleep. Presently she sat up erect in bed. Her mind seemed pondering over some weighty problem—a problem upon which life and death depended.

"At last! at last!" she gasped. "I feel that I have the correct clue."

Quickly her thoughts stole back to that evening long ago at Kempton, when Arthur Gravenor cursed her and all she held most dear, and swore that some day she would suffer for all the wrong she had done him.

Then she pictured that second meeting but a few nights ago at the garden recital, and heard again the selfsame words. She remembered distinctly having heard him swear: "I shall never forget nor forgive you!" Might he not have heaped all this sorrow upon her, just for the sake of satisfying the impulses of his jealous heart? He hated her bitterly for the cool reception she had given him. The longer her mind dwelt upon these memories, the stronger grew the belief that perhaps, after all, Arthur Gravenor was the man who knew more about this tragedy than any other. He was the only man in the world whom she had any reason to fear, the only man who had ever dared to curse her, the only man who at the present moment carried a deadly hatred in his heart. And now it seemed strange to her that she should not have thought of him long before. In excitement the mind often plays queer antics. This had been Mrs. Lescot's experience. She had thought out many motives, but had overlooked the most probable one. At last she felt as if she had her fingers on the culprit.

She jumped out of bed, greatly agitated, and began dressing. "I shall go to Detective Griven at once and tell him the whole story. Arthur Gravenor will not feel so spiteful when the law fastens its iron chains around him. But perhaps he has left the Clarendon. How-

ever, they will be able to find him. Thank God! I am beginning to see the daylight."

The woman staggered a little. "It is very late," she said; "I should not go out."

She threw a long cloak over her shoulders. "I feel so strange," she gasped faintly. "My head is dizzy—and—I—cannot—catch my breath. I am choking."

Her lips took on a bluish tint. She gasped for breath and swayed to and fro several times.

"Water, water!" she whispered faintly, and then sank to the floor.

"I am dying!" sounded the faint, weak voice. "Ah! I see—the—daylight—God—is—good! God—is—good," she repeated slowly. Then her head sank back, there was the faintest smile, and the struggle was over.

Some time after the little boy awoke. Noticing that his mother was gone, he cried pitifully. Then he crept to the edge of the bed.

There on the floor lay the mother who had fought life's battle bravely, beautiful with the smile of peace upon her face.

In a moment the child was down beside his mother's form, sobbing bitterly in the moonlit room. He called loudly to her and tried to rouse her, but there was no answer. Then the two little lips sought the tender cheeks. They were already cold.

Again the pleading, childlike voice sounded. The wind outside alone sent back answer. Poor little fellow! He was all alone now in the wide world. He seemed to understand. Lovingly he laid his curly head against his mother's and folded his trembling hands.

In the morning they found him asleep on his mother's breast, his tiny arm about her neck. He looked like one of God's angels, guarding the precious dead.

CHAPTER XVI.

In Temptation's Way.

"We are all men,
In our own natures frail, and capable
Of our flesh; few are angels."
—*Shakespeare.*

THE occupants of Bleur House were delighted over the arrival of Gracia. The child took kindly to its new home and surroundings, and everybody in the place, from Aunt Hawkins to Matt Pensy, felt quite an affection for the newly arrived stranger. For the present the little one was the chief attraction at the Gravenors'.

"She is a perfect little dear," Aunt Hawkins said to Muriel on the evening of their arrival. "And such a pretty name—Gracia! It reminds one of the birds and flowers and all things beautiful. But what strange fancy possessed Arthur to bring the child home with him?"

"The little thing," said Muriel, "was without father or mother, and the woman who had charge of the child one day complained bitterly to Arthur. She said she did not know what would become of Gracia. The woman was poor, and her heart seemed to long for a comfortable home for the little one. So Arthur took pity and adopted her."

"I am glad he did," said the warm-hearted Mrs. Hawkins. "The coming of the child, I am sure, will infuse a new life into Bleur House and, let me hope, into Arthur's heart. By the way, Muriel, I think he looks dreadful. Dr. Cascada inquired only yesterday as to his condition. I am afraid he will be surprised when he sees him."

"Arthur has not been well at all, auntie. The Place o' Pines did not seem to agree with him, and he begged—fairly begged—to return to Kempton. Going, he spoke of that Mazie Rawlins affair continually, until I rebuked him. At the island he never again alluded to it, but I could see that there were heavy thoughts on his mind. I am afraid, auntie, he will never be well again."

"I, too, feel that the worst will come. Oh, I am so glad you are at home again! The house did seem very lonely. We missed you all so much."

"I am sure the house did seem empty. Do you know the Place o' Pines is a beautiful spot. Kitty and I were delighted with it. Nothing but water, sky, trees, flowers and sunshine. It seems funny, leaving such a warm, summery place, to find winter reigning here in Kempton."

"Yes, there has been a goodly amount of snow and fine sleighing."

For hours Aunt Hawkins listened to Muriel's description of her trip to the island.

"Midnight—and Arthur not home yet!" exclaimed Muriel as she rose from her chair. "Where did he go this evening?"

"Down to the mill," answered Mrs. Hawkins. "The manager wanted to see him on important business. He telephoned for him in the early part of the evening."

The interview with the manager had only lasted a half hour. Affairs at the mill, it was proven, had been in a most satisfactory condition, and when Arthur expressed the wish that the manager advertise as soon as possible that the mill was for sale, the latter hardly knew what to say.

"Surely you are not in earnest, Mr. Gravenor?" he said, overcome with surprise. "You surely don't want to sell the mill, now that profits show such an enormous increase."

"I meant what I said. The mill must go. I am not well, and intend taking a rest. Place that advertisement with the *Daily Chronicle* to-morrow, so that it will appear in the evening edition."

"This place haunts me," Arthur mused to himself as he turned the key in the old mill door, some hours later, after the manager had gone. "I seem to see Lawrence and Mazie Lescot's faces wherever I go. Ever since I left the Place o' Pines I can hear

their voices accusing me of crime. God knows I am guilty enough. Why did I steal Gracia? It was cruel, heartless, to rob that woman of her child. I must make amends or my sins will never be forgiven me. The child must be restored to its mother. She shall not suffer any longer. But how am I to go about it? God—O my God! show me the way—show me the way!"

Like a man whose soul is lashed by despair, he stumbled down the steps and made for the open street.

A bright moon was shining in the crystal sky above; and through the fallen snow Arthur Gravenor wended his lonely way. Kempton was asleep, nestling sweetly under her snowy blankets. Everything was white—blessed with the beautiful garb of innocence. Arthur could not help thinking of his own soul, now blackened with sin and shame. How he longed that things might have been otherwise! The moment he had set his foot upon that outgoing ship at the Place o' Pines, the stolen child in his trembling arms, his sin had stood before him, glaring, accusing him. He could not banish it. It followed him wherever he went, like some dread ghost, haunting his restless brain and shadowing life's sky with clouds of dread.

For two hours he had attempted to curb his thoughts, but it was useless. It was too late!

too late! Upon his soul's shore the waves were piling up the driftwood that spoke of lost hopes, broken hearts and ruined lives.

Presently he reached the river's bank. The water was not frozen at this particular spot, but was quite deep. The stream was still as death. For a moment he stared into the depths that reflected the midnight skies. An almost uncontrollable desire took possession of his soul—a desire to put an end to all his suffering and misery. He paused for a moment. Then his feet slipped down the embankment and he was ready to throw himself into the cold water, when lo! he seemed to hear his mother's warning voice calling out to him through the forgotten years: "Arthur! Arthur! Remember your God, and what becomes of those who wilfully take their life into their hands! Remember, remember!"

He sprang from the river's edge, suddenly frightened by the terrible deed which he had thought of committing. This was the second time in his life he had been saved from utter ruin.

Gladly he turned his face toward the city and hurried in the direction of Bleur House.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Heart Speaks Too Late.

"Ah! the sweet young rose of hope is dead—
'Twill never bloom again,
And the tears I shed for the beautiful dead,
They fall like the desolate rain."

—*Winter.*

ONE week later the large lumber mill was sold. Thus the property drifted out of the hands of the Gravenors, and a substantial amount was placed to their credit in their already generous bank account.

"I am glad the mill is sold," Muriel remarked to Mrs. Hawkins. "In his present state Arthur could never have managed it satisfactorily. Besides, Dr. Cascada thinks it a move in the right direction. He feels that Arthur should not have any business worries to contend with. Perhaps his mind will now become rested."

New Year's eve arrived—that blessed time when souls expand in the fullness of newly found joy, and the mind feels refreshed to know that a new era of happiness is about to dawn upon poor suffering humanity! What satisfaction to feel that the heart is about to throw off its soiled garments like a child—the trials, cares and sufferings of the days that

are gone—to emerge in a robe of dazzling brightness and beauty upon which Hope has set many a sparkling jewel and Love many a silken bow! What satisfaction to feel that one's eyes are again set upon the New Year—blessed future that harbors many a golden dream, many a cherished sacrifice and many a noble happiness!

It was to be an evening of special interest to the occupants of Bleur House. Fully a hundred guests had been invited to enjoy the hospitality of the Gravenors. All day Muriel and Kitty had been busy festooning the halls and rooms with wreaths and flowers. Matt Pensy, too, that genial-hearted soul, had given them full control of the conservatory.

"You may have all the flowers an' plants you wish, Muriel," he said to the girl early in the day. "Now, who could refuse you with your kind way o' askin'? Where's Gracia, the darlin'?"

"Here she comes," cried Muriel. "Gracia, Gracia!"

"I'm tummin', mama," came the childish voice.

Presently the little one, all bundled up, hurried over to Muriel. Then, catching hold of the latter's apron strings, she played "hide and seek" with Matt.

"Ah, you little lump o' sweetness," the gardener exclaimed, "now I see you!"

A burst of laughter came from the child's lips, clear and sweet as the song of the brook.

" 'Ou tant tatch me, untle," called the little one as she stumbled down the narrow snow path.

A few steps and Matt Pensy held Gracia in his arms, kissing her cheeks tenderly.

" There now, Muriel, I'll take Gracia into the conservatory with me. It's nice an' warm in there for the little thing."

" Dood-bye, mama—dood-bye!"

The plump little hand stole to the child's lips and she threw a parting kiss.

By evening everything was in readiness for the New Year's party, and in her heart Muriel hoped that the meeting of kind friends and the rehearsing of old scenes would surely help to gladden her brother's heart. By eight o'clock the guests began to arrive, and when another hour had passed the rooms echoed the sound of merry voices. Only the most intimate friends of the Gravenors were there—men and women whose prestige counted for much in the various social circles of Kempton. A few of the friends of Muriel's parents, now white with the years, also came to help gladden the rooms wherein they had sat and celebrated many a time in their younger days. Presently an orchestra, hidden in an alcove of palms, played a delicious melody from Rubinstein. Delicate and soothing, the tender air

stole into the hearts of the guests, and for a moment the chattering of voices ceased. The music took one's thoughts to green blowing meadows where the winds played with the merry elfin sun children in the long, moist grass.

Arthur sat at the table in his room upstairs, looking over the day's mail. He was desirous of doing this before betaking himself to the rooms below, now riotous with laughter. He did not fancy all this display just then. The music and the busy voices stealing from the hall below irritated him. He wished himself thousands of miles away from all such scenes of gaiety. In his heart he was wondering what the New Year would bring Mazie. Certainly not happiness, heart-satisfaction or peace. Ah, no—despair! A despair, dark as a moonless, starless night. And as he sat there his heart trembled, now that the New Year stood on the threshold, her golden cup filled with promises to the brim.

Suddenly a child's voice sounded in the hall outside and, in a moment, Gracia entered, a playful smile upon her lovely face.

"Poor little wayside-rose! gift of heaven!" he murmured as he stroked her long silken curls tenderly, "fresh, blossoming rose with all its leafy hopes yet unfolded! What right had I to pluck you? I know that a certain garden beyond the sea is lonely, now that you

are no longer there. But you will return some day—some day, child."

He took the little one in his arms and held her to his breast in a fatherly, loving way.

Arthur had devised a plan whereby he would restore the child to that breaking mother-heart at the Place o' Pines, and that at the earliest opportunity.

For a few moments his eyes wandered over a letter, referring to several business details. Presently the child moved about excitedly, calling: "Mama—mama! dere's mama!"

Arthur looked and noticed that Gracia was pointing to a picture on the desk in front of him.

It was a picture of Mazie Rawlins. Had the child recognized her mother's face? Arthur's soul shrank at the very thought of it, and hurriedly he threw the picture into the flames. Then, somewhat nervously, he picked up the last letter. It had the Place o' Pines postmark on the face of it. Whose could the strange handwriting be? It was scarcely legible. It must have come from some uneducated person. Signor Frescati had written him several letters, but this was not his handwriting. He opened it, and several newspaper clippings fell to the desk. He picked them up excitedly; and his eyes scanned the strange little note accompanying them:

"The secret is my very own. It shall never be revealed. Depend upon it! The detectives are foiled. We are safe.

"MAD NANCE."

Arthur was surprised that Mad Nance had discovered his identity. He did not know, however, that she had read his name upon the purse the evening he visited her.

"What does all this mean?" he gasped, his face showing a deathlike pallor. The child had in the meantime fallen asleep in his arms. Again his eyes stole to the newspaper clippings. Two referred to the supposed murder in the Lescot cottage and the fruitless searches of the detectives; the other to Mazie's tragic death.

Eagerly his eyes wandered over the printed lines. They described Mazie's homecoming, the finding of the little cross, the calling of the neighbors to the scene of the murder, the long, dreary day, and the finding of the woman's body next morning, with the sleeping son clinging to her breast.

"It is terrible!—terrible!" he moaned. "Great God, be merciful! This is punishment enough! Mazie is dead! Oh, it cannot be!"

For a brief moment he raised his hands and covered his eyes, as if to shut out the appall-

ing vision. Then he looked upon Gracia, happy child, sleeping sweetly in his arms.

"Too late! too late!" he sobbed, as his head sank upon the desk.

A moment later he rose, laid the sleeping child upon his bed and dried his tears. Then, aimlessly, he wandered out of the room. The sound of music and the chattering voices again filled his ears. This time they found in his heart a new sorrow.

What was he to do? Was he to join his friends below, now that a fresh crushing blow had almost smitten him down? He paused a moment at the staircase.

"For Muriel's sake, I'll go," he whispered. "I shall keep my sorrow to myself."

A moment later he stepped into the place of mirth, and, for a while at least, tried to smother his heart's feelings.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Place of Mirth.

"But oh, for the touch of a vanish'd hand,
And the sound of a voice that is still!"
—*Tennyson.*

ARTHUR moved nervously through the brilliantly lighted drawing-room, shaking hands on all sides as he went. He tried to return the smiles showered upon him, but his were forced. How could it be otherwise? Now that the distressing news of Mazie's tragic death was still so fresh in his mind, he was sorely troubled. He could not help thinking he was responsible for it all, and his conscience repeated its accusations. His friends seemed glad to see him, yet they could not help noticing that his health had failed perceptibly.

Dr. Cascada and Mrs. Hawkins were seated in the far corner, engaged in earnest conversation.

"Ah, there comes Arthur," exclaimed the genial doctor. "I have not seen him for a few days."

"Yes. The poor fellow is to be pitied," observed Mrs. Hawkins. "What do you think of him? There are more reasons than one why I should like to know. So speak plainly, doctor!"

"To be plain with you, then, Mrs. Hawkins, I think Arthur will never be well again. His mental symptoms are growing worse. He is now beginning to have fixed delusions; and I think you may expect the worst."

"Is the case really so hopeless?" demanded Mrs. Hawkins, overcome with emotion.

"Yes, I would not be surprised to see him go completely insane."

"Insane!" the woman cried out. "Ah, it is a hard word, doctor. Do you really mean it?"

"It will now take very little to turn his mind—poor fellow!"

Presently Arthur and Muriel met. The latter looked charming in a silken lace gown of rare design, a red rose fastened carelessly in her hair.

"You look stunning to-night, my sweet," Arthur said as he laid his hand upon her drooping shoulders.

"Of course, you recognize my new gown," she remarked proudly. "I am glad you like it. Is not this a charming evening, brother? Look at all the merry guests assembled here—and all our good friends, too."

Arthur's eyes stole around the room.

"It is all very delightful," he said.

He was on the verge of telling his sister of Mazie's death, but something held him back.

At that moment a matronly-looking woman

came over to Muriel, whispered something into her ear and departed.

"Mrs. Castles," Muriel remarked, "has just expressed the wish that you sing something. She says many of the guests will be delighted.

"Ah, sister, do not ask me to sing," he pleaded.

"Please sing; do, Arthur—just a little bit of something to satisfy them."

Arthur Gravenor was known in the city as the possessor of a fine tenor voice. He had often been heard on the concert platform; but recently his name had not appeared on the programmes.

"Very well, Muriel, I shall try. It seems so long since I sang, I hardly know how it will go."

"What shall it be, Arthur?"

"Let's try 'The Heart Bowed Down,' from 'The Bohemian Girl.'"

The words seemed to suit Arthur's state of mind, and he knew he could do the song full justice. Instantly they echoed through his brain:

"The heart bow'd down by weight of woe
To weakest hopes will cling,
To thought and impulse while they flow
That can no comfort bring—
With those exciting scenes will blend,
O'er pleasure's pathway thrown;
But Memory is the only friend
That grief can call its own—"

Then he repeated loudly:

"But Memory is the only friend
That grief can call its own—"

"Pretty words, Muriel, aren't they? Shall I sing the song?"

"Let us choose something livelier. The words and music are so sad."

"Very well. What shall it be?"

Muriel hesitated a moment.

"Let me see," she said. "Ah, yes, I have it. Sing Liza Lehman's 'At the Making of the Hay.' It is full of life and feeling, and seems to suit your voice admirably."

Arthur hardly felt equal to the task. The song was so lively and cheerful that he could not reconcile his present feelings to the words. However, he decided to try.

Muriel seated herself at the piano, and Arthur stood at her side and faced the audience. Suddenly the voices around ceased, and his strong, manly tenor sounded through the room, full of tenderness and sympathy:

"When the whip-poor-wills are calling,
And the apple blooms are falling,
With a tender hint forestalling
Summer's blush upon the grass;
Where the little stars are keeping
Watch above the meadows sleeping,
And the Jack-o'-lantern's peeping,
I will meet my bonnie lass!
Fal-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la!
I will meet my bonnie lass!
Fal-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la!
I will meet my bonnie lass!"

When Arthur had finished his song he was greeted with rounds of applause. His rich voice had shown off to good advantage, and he had put the necessary dash and spirit into his enunciation.

"I can hardly understand how I finished the song," he mused within himself. "It seems cruel to sing such words when my heart is crushed by sorrow. I am sure they must have detected it in my voice."

To satisfy himself he turned to Muriel when she rose from the piano, and asked: "How was it, sister?"

"Beautifully sung, my dear. To me it seemed as if Frescati was singing. It was all so artistic, so clear and resonant, and the words came with such feeling."

"It seems strange," Arthur thought, "that I should have interpreted the song properly. The meadow fields with their fragrance and bloom were far away. My thoughts were elsewhere. They stole into a little cottage, miles from here, where silence reigned. There I saw a woman's face—Mazie's—cold in death, look up at me from a bed of roses. Oh, it was terrible—terrible!"

That night, when all the excitement had subsided and the last guest had wandered home, Arthur seated himself at his desk. His mind seemed busy, his forehead wrinkled,

and he stared into space. Suddenly he wrote hurried lines to Mad Nance.

"I wonder what became of Mazie Rawlins' boy?" he asked himself. "The little fellow must be cared for. He shall not be left alone in the world. I will write Mad Nance. I hope she will be able to give me news of him."

When he had finished the letter, his eyes stole to the bed, but Gracia was not there. Kitty had placed her in her crib sometime previously, and now the little one was dreaming of fairy princes.

"The poor little motherless darling," he moaned, "and all through me!"

Then his head sank upon the desk and he sobbed. Genuine sorrow for the wrong he had done had stolen into his heart and found a welcome.

CHAPTER XIX.

Death the Deliverer.

"He that dies pays all debts."
—*Shakespeare.*

ONE day Arthur wrote another letter, spending considerable time over it. "I think that will do," was all he said as he sealed the envelope. Then he addressed it:

"*To* MISS GRACIA GRAVENOR.
To be opened
On her Twentieth Birthday."

"She is only a child now," he mused, "but some day she will grow into a woman." When the letter was safely housed in a little iron casket in the family vault, Arthur gave a sigh of relief. "Thank God, it is done. I feel somewhat easier now," he said thoughtfully.

During the weeks that followed the news of Mazie Lescot's demise Arthur suffered keenly the slow, gnawing pain of a disturbed and tortured mind. His appetite failed. He spent sleepless nights and worried incessantly. In a short time he became only a shadow of his former self. Muriel clung to the faintest

hope until the last; and then her heart sank. Formerly of a mild, quiet disposition, Arthur now experienced regular periods of mental excitement.

It was during one of these attacks, in the middle of a cold night in February, that he left his room. The winds piled up the snow in drifts, and the air was cold and stormy. Roused out of his sleep, he had imagined that some evil spirits were pursuing him, driving him to his death. He could stand the haunting voices no longer; he jumped out of bed, threw his heavy dressing-gown over his shoulders and ran barefooted into the cold, wintry street. Matt Pensy and Muriel found him sitting on one of the garden benches almost frozen. The following day he was taken down with a severe illness. The young millionaire was never to rise from his bed again. Pneumonia of a very virulent type set in, and, though the patient passed the crisis successfully, a heart complication soon put an end to the life that flickered so feebly.

All the occupants of Bleur House spent some time with the dying man on that last sad day. Matt Pensy and Kitty were heart-broken. The priest called in the early morning, and, gentle man of God, helped to direct the trembling soul along the thorny paths into the joyous dawn of eternal life. On his

deathbed Arthur Gravenor made his peace with God.

When the end was near, the dying man called Muriel to his bedside.

"Go to the vault," he directed feebly, "and bring me the little iron casket. I have something to say to you before going."

In a moment Muriel returned.

"Open it, Muriel, please. There you will find my last will and testament," he proceeded in the feeblest whisper. Speaking seemed an effort. It made him very breathless. "And here," picking up a sealed envelope, "is a letter addressed to Gracia. Read it to her on her twentieth birthday. Don't forget, sister dear, it is very important. Be good to Gracia, for my sake. Muriel, I die happy. Forgive me all the crosses I have placed upon your shoulders. Death will be very sweet when it comes, for I know God has forgiven my offences; and they were many."

When the end came, peacefully and quietly, Arthur stretched out his wasted, thin hand, and had a smile and a kind word of parting for Muriel and Aunt Hawkins, who, broken-hearted, had watched at his bedside all day long.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Then they opened widely.

"The child!" he gasped. "Gracia!

Where — is — she? Let—me—kiss—her—again—before—I—go."

Muriel, weeping bitterly, lifted Gracia to him. The child's lips met his for an instant, and he smiled the smile of peace.

"My—little—wayside—rose—good-bye!" the thin voice gasped.

Then the struggle was over. The great Deliverer had come.

CHAPTER XX.

Gracia Gravenor.

"She looks as clear
As morning roses newly wash'd with dew."
—*Shakespeare.*

SIXTEEN years passed. Gracia Gravenor was now a charming young girl of nineteen and sole possessor of the Gravenor wealth. She and Aunt Hawkins had Bleur House all to themselves. Muriel, feeling that she had a vocation, had entered a convent ten years after her brother's death, having waited patiently until Gracia had grown into young girlhood. Gracia and Muriel, now known to the world as Sister Benita, met frequently. St. Agatha's, the home of the community which Muriel had joined, was only five blocks from Bleur House. To the young girl the nun really was a second mother. In fact she was the only mother Gracia had ever known. When the heart felt heavy and needed directing it was to St. Agatha's she went; and she generally felt the better for her visit.

One morning Gracia and Aunt Hawkins loitered carelessly in the flower garden. The latter looked very old with the burden of her years, yet her face showed the same graceful,

pleasant smile. Her shoulders were bent, and she tottered as she walked; but the trusty cane in her trembling hand helped her along the well-kept garden walk.

It was one of spring's most tranquil days. The air was warm, and the sunbeams wandered from their mother's lap in the skies, like happy-hearted children, blithe and gay. The trees were covered with snowy white blossoms, and the grass had made a verdant carpet over the damp earth. There was activity on all sides. The awakening had come, heralded by gentle, whispering breezes. Mother Earth was busy at her loom, weaving tapestries of green and white and yellow and gold for the palaces of the king—the summer that even then was speeding across the eastern hills.

"Ah, 'tis a glorious morning, Gracia," remarked the aged aunt, "a morning worth living for. My thoughts are stealing to the poets who revel over God's own out-of-doors, when springtime glows on valley, mountain and meadow. Listen! Are not these sweet lines?

"'Warble me now, for joy of lilac time,
Sort me, O tongue and lips, for Nature's sake, and sweet life's sake—and death's the same as life's,
Souvenirs of earliest summer—birds' eggs and the first berries;
Gather the welcome signs (as children, with pebbles, or stringing shells);

Put in April and May—the hylas croaking in the ponds—
the elastic air,
Bees, butterflies, the sparrow with its simple notes,
Bluebird and darting swallow—nor forget the high-hole,
flashing his golden wings,
The tranquil, sunny haze, the clinging smoke, the vapor,
Spiritual, airy insects, humming on gossamer wings,
Shimmer of waters, with fish in them—the cerulean above;
All that is jocund and sparkling—the brooks running,
The maple woods, the crisp February days and the sugar-
making;
The robin, where he hops, bright-eyed, brown-breasted,
With musical, clear call at sunrise, and again at sunset,
Or flitting among the trees of the apple-orchard, building
the nest of his mate;
The melted snow of March—the willow sending forth its
yellow-green sprouts:
For Springtime is here!"

"What a beautiful description," remarked Gracia, "so picturesque and Wordsworthian!"

"Wordsworth was a great poet, but, do you know, I think some of our moderns surpass him."

Aunt Hawkins was a great lover of the poets. She read them assiduously and memorized easily.

They walked on a few steps arm in arm, chatting briskly, for joy was in their hearts.

Presently, through the bushes, a voice sounded distinctly. The women stood still and listened eagerly—

"Oh, I wouldn't live forever;
I wouldn't if I could:
But I need not fret about it—
I couldn't if I would."

"It is Matt," whispered Gracia. "The poor old soul is always jolly. Come, let us see what he is doing!" And together they went in the direction of the singing voice.

Presently they met the gray old gardener face to face.

"The top o' the morning to you both!" he said heartily.

"That was a fine song you sang just a moment ago," remarked Aunt Hawkins, smilingly.

"Ah, yes, yes—no' bad at all, auntie," he laughed loudly. "Do you know, me schoolmaster taught me that over in the old log schoolhouse when I was a wee sprig o' a lad. Ah! 'twas glorious—the sound o' his voice an' the fiddle in between! How the whole countryside sat around him those cool, quiet evenin's! But it's glad I am to see you out this fine mornin'."

"What are you doing, Matt?" asked Mrs. Hawkins.

"Workin' about me flower-beds. See! the violets are already stickin' up their blue heads," he exclaimed, as he pointed to a bed of them near by.

"Are they not lovely?" observed Gracia. "By the way, Matt, when did you rise this morning?"

"Oh, quite early, darlin'. I was up with the birds just as the sun was stickin' his head

over the garden wall. I suppose it might ha' been about four by the clock."

"So early?" Gracia asked. "I think you are killing yourself. You are getting old, and you should sleep until seven."

"Goodness, child!" he interrupted, "sleep till seven, when the birds are callin', an' the sunbeams are out o' bed, an' the winds are knockin' at me windows! No, no! I cannot do it. I like to be out in the open in those early hours an' feel the wet grass squeak under me boots. When the dawn breaks then God seems to be around. It is all so quiet, an' I often think I hear His footsteps on the grass. Some day, Mrs. Hawkins," he added sadly, "He will be comin' for us, but I do hope He will let me see summer in me garden once more. After that I don't care when the call comes. Matt Pensy will be glad to go—home."

"You should not speak so gloomily," said Gracia. "We do not want to lose you yet."

"But won't you sit down on the bench here?" the gardener asked kindly. "I am sure, Mrs. Hawkins, you are tired standin'."

The two sat down upon the bench, and Matt continued: "By the way, it was just a mornin' like this when Muriel—God bless her—came to this very spot, years ago, to bid me good-bye. She looked so pretty that mornin' as she sat there on the bench—just like a pure

soul gazin' through the gates o' heaven. And oh, how I hated that she should leave the old home forever! It touched me heart sorely. She told me she had come out to take a long, last look at the garden before leavin' for the convent. There were tears in her eyes an' she wept like a child. But she was happy an' willin' to make the sacrifice. She said God needed her elsewhere—the little saint! She was too good for the world."

"When did you see her last?" questioned Aunt Hawkins.

"Oh, I was just over to St. Agatha's a few days ago. I took her some roses for the chapel, an' she seemed so pleased. An' how sweet she looked in her neat white an' black habit, so good and innocent-like! She was busy paintin' some wonderful picture. By jiminy! I tell you Sister Benita is one of the smartest women in the world."

"Well done, Matt. You spoke the truth," remarked Gracia. "Sister Benita is just a perfect angel." Gracia really meant what she said. To her the nun was the embodiment of all goodness and perfection.

"The flowers are thirsty," Matt said gently, "an' I guess I'll have to give them some fresh water!" And pail in hand, he wandered down the garden path, singing loudly—

"Oh, I wouldn't live forever;
I wouldn't if I could—"

When the last word had died away, Gracia busied herself with her pencil.

"What are you going to sketch, dear?" Aunt Hawkins asked, as she opened a copy of Tennyson on her lap.

"I want to paint a picture of the garden," she answered. "It is such a pretty spot in the springtime, with the bright blue sky showing above the cedars and hemlocks."

"The picture will not be complete without Matt, Gracia. He is the soul of the place."

"Certainly, auntie, Matt must not be forgotten. I shall sketch him when he returns. I would like to catch him bending over the flowers. He looks so thoughtful—just as if the little things were whispering some message to him."

Gracia had developed into a promising young artist. The most exacting art connoisseurs praised her work. During the past six months she had been studying with Jerome Chelsea—the noted young European artist of wide repute, who had come to Kempton but a year before. Pupil and teacher were fast friends. A strong, mutual liking seemed to have drawn together the bonds of a noble friendship.

For some time the two women on the bench were silent—Gracia busy with pencil and paper, and Mrs. Hawkins deeply interested in her book.

"There, now, the sketch is completed!" Gracia exclaimed, with a certain air of satisfaction, as she held the paper to her eyes. "I just happened to catch Matt as I wanted him."

"It's beautiful, beautiful, child!" observed the aged woman. "There's Matt, just as real as life, stooping over the flower-beds, the tall bushes and part of the straggling fence behind, and, in the distance, the spreading cedars and the flecks of sky. Still farther off, I see the belfry of St. Agatha's. It is beautiful, child. I can hardly wait until I see the water-color."

Matt passed, spade in hand, to begin his work in another part of the garden.

"Come here, Matt," Gracia called girlishly, "and see what I have done."

The old gardener came over, blushing faintly.

"Well, well, me girl, so you're takin' to drawin' pictures o' this old pile o' bones," he laughed tenderly. "When the picture's done I'm sure it will find a home in one of them big galleries in Paris. The dear old garden! I know I shall miss the place when I am gone. I have spent the gladdest years o' my life here, an' me heart aches when I think o' the hour o' partin.' But here's to you, girl o' me heart, may your love for the beautiful things o' this grand old earth continue; an' may God bless you!"

With these words Matt Pensy wandered off, a light of gladness shining in his clear eyes.

A tolling bell, afar off, sent a shudder through the quiet morning air.

"I don't like the sound of that bell," Gracia said sadly. "It makes me feel ill at ease."

"It reminds me of the morning we laid Arthur at rest," Mrs. Hawkins remarked, a few tears gathering in her eyes.

"Poor uncle! I cannot remember him at all," murmured Gracia. "How old was I when he died."

"Just three, dear."

"Oh, I was too young, then, to remember. By the way, auntie, I have often wondered what mama and papa looked like. Did you ever see them?"

"No, child."

A little sigh escaped Gracia's lips.

"Was I left all alone in the world, then?" she continued, a strange feeling stealing into her heart.

Mrs. Hawkins was not desirous of answering any further questions lest Gracia might learn of her adoption from the poor woman at the Place o' Pines. Up to the present she believed herself a relative of the Gravenors, and it was well that she should continue thinking so.

Just then Matt returned, holding a letter in his hand.

Here's somethin' for you, me girl," he chuckled, addressing Gracia—" a nice little letter, in a gentleman's handwritin', with the smell o' violets clingin' to it."

Then he passed on, the faintest twinkle of a smile in his eyes.

Quickly Gracia opened the envelope; and the odor of spring violets rose from the little missive.

" From Jerome Chelsea!" she whispered to herself, gladly.

When she had finished reading the letter she gazed at Aunt Hawkins. The dear old woman was still deeply interested in Tennyson. She had not taken any notice of the letter; and the girl was glad.

The next moment Gracia raised the scented missive to her lips and kissed it tenderly—a look of ineffable sweetness upon her upturned face, flower-like in its fragile loveliness.

CHAPTER XXI.

Love's Rose-Time.

"Love is a child that talks in broken language;
Yet then he speaks most plain."

—*Dryden.*

GRACIA found a new meaning in life since the arrival of Jerome Chelsea's daintily written note. Her thoughts had probed down deeply into her soul, and now the heart went bounding. Excusing herself abruptly, she hurried away from Aunt Hawkins, saying that she was anxious to get to work at the picture she had just sketched.

"You see, auntie," she continued, "I am supposed to take my painting lesson at the studio to-day. Besides, I want to purchase a few necessary articles down town this morning."

When Gracia reached her room she threw herself into her large easy-chair, a feeling of intense joy in her young, untried heart. Unconsciously, almost, her fingers stole to her breast and drew forth the coveted letter. She kissed it over and over again. She held it in her fingers as if it were some sacred thing. Again and again she read the lines. Then, more slowly, she repeated each word, lingering long upon the music of its meaning.

"Dear Gracia: Pardon my boldness in addressing you thus, but my heart seems to whisper that you will not be offended. For the past few weeks I have been wanting to tell you something concerning a matter of vital interest to both of us. But, so far, my courage has failed me. When you come to the studio again you shall hear it all. Do not stay away too long. I shall count the hours until I see you. "JEROME."

"The dear boy!" she whispered, her heart beating joyfully. "What can he mean, anyway? I am sure it must be about one of my canvases. Perhaps word has come from Paris that it has won a prize."

She paused a moment, wrapped in deep thought. Then again she read the last lines slowly: "Do not stay away too long. I shall count the hours until I see you." In her mind she repeated the lines over and over again. They seemed to voice a tender, a pathetic longing.

"Surely Jerome Chelsea, the great artist, has not fallen in love with me!" mused the girl. "Ah, no, he does not care for me."

Even then her thoughts pained her; for of all the places in Kempton none seemed to draw her heart like the cosy little studio of this busy artist. A sudden attachment had sprung up between the two from that first day

on which Gracia had come to him as his pupil; a friendship supported by nothing artificial, but dependent upon an abiding reciprocity of esteem which infused new life and animation into both their hearts.

Jerome always felt sorry that the lesson was over so soon; and when Gracia was gone he would think of her for hours as he sat working at his easel.

"She is a perfect lady," he would say. "Her coming into the studio seems to bring the sunshine with it. All the day's worries vanish, and her gentle, rich voice supplies many a lonely minute with music."

For some time Gracia's mind seemed to be treasuring glorious visions; for, wandering along her heart's highway, Happiness—devoted twin sister of Virtue—had come unbidden to her soul and left the sweetest peace upon it. Then her thoughts stole to the studio and to Jerome. It was such a blessing for her to think that he was so very near, such a comfort to know that his very fingers had penned sweet lines to her. In the days that had vanished, she had often thought of him as some noble, strong guardian angel who had been placed at the very crossroads of her life just as she was passing. Often in her heart she thanked God for it. Often she would have spoken the word that was nearest and dearest to her lips; often she would have

placed her hand tenderly in his; often she would have smiled upon him, in that delicious room of sketches and paintings, but that strange something, rising within her, always held her back. Now that the little letter had arrived from the man whom she had placed on so lofty a pedestal in her heart's kingdom, she hoped that her dream might come true.

Soon Gracia was on her way down the street, whither she was going to purchase some supplies. She peeped into many a shop window, loitering here and there, her eyes feasting for the moment upon some rare thing of beauty. Presently she passed a neat little cottage, standing several yards from the street. On one of the windows, emblazoned in black and gold, one read the inscription:

"JEROME CHELSEA.
Studio."

She paused a moment, as if wrapped in thought. Her lesson was not until three in the afternoon, and the city clock across the street only pointed the hour of ten. She knew Jerome would be at home. The morning hours were generally his working hours. How her eyes longed for a sight of him! It seemed ages since she had seen him last, and yet only two days had elapsed. What was she to do? Cupid seemed to have complete

control of the situation, and her feelings urged "yes." So down the quaint rose path she hurried, her heart beating vigorously.

Almost breathless, she ascended the narrow steps and rang the bell.

The door opened, and a pretty, girlish voice sounded.

"Good morning, Miss Gravenor."

"Is Mr. Chelsea in?"

"Yes. Step into the reception room a minute and I shall call him."

Gracia walked into the restful, beautiful room—that home of bric-a-brac, curios, souvenirs, pictures and books.

Presently the woman returned and, bowing profoundly, said: "Mr. Chelsea is busy now, and has begged me to bring you to his working room, which you must consider a very great honor. You are the first woman I have shown to the place."

"Really?" questioned Gracia, shyly.

Gracia had been in this particular room many a time in the past; but all the doings about the studio were not known to this fussy, precise little mortal who answered the door-bell.

"Walk down the hall—the first turn to the right," the maid directed.

In a moment Gracia stood at the workshop door. A gentle rap, and footsteps sounded within.

"Why, how do you do, Gracia? I beg your pardon—I mean Miss Gravenor," stammered Jerome, agreeably surprised. "Come right in. I was just thinking of you this moment; and here you are, as full of life and beauty as ever. Really, Gracia—I beg your pardon—"

"Proceed! Just call me Gracia for short," interrupted the girl. "It sounds better."

"Do you think so?" he asked, a merry look twinkling in his eyes.

Gracia was a picture of loveliness in her smart spring gown of soft gray cloth. The morning sun, stealing through the large, open window, rested full upon her pretty face—the delicate pink, rose petal complexion, the small red, regular lips, the snowy teeth and the dancing black eyes. She wore a neat picturesque hat trimmed with deep pink roses, which was very becoming to her neatly arranged brown hair. At her throat sparkled a tiny golden brooch set with diamonds.

Jerome, too, looked as if the spring had made his heart glad. Like Gracia, his complexion was fair. His hair, a shade darker than hers, was rather long. When he smiled his red lips parted and several dimples showed conspicuously in his cheeks. A loose working robe of thin, gauzy material hung carelessly over his form. From his white collar was suspended a black silken tie, tied care-

lessly. He looked like a man enjoying the best of health. His features were clear-cut and vigorous. In age, he was perhaps a few years older than Gracia. The quick, flashing look in his eyes showed plainly that he was an observant and thoughtful man.

Fastening his gown somewhat nervously, he rose and said bashfully: "Won't you be seated, Gracia—here on this cosy couch? Come!"

Slowly he sank down beside her. Soon they were engaged in the most absorbing conversation.

"What brought you out so early?" he asked inquisitively.

"Oh, I wanted to buy a few brushes at the art store," she answered. "Besides I had other shopping to do."

"Did you receive my letter?" he continued anxiously.

"Yes, Jerome, I did," she answered, her cheeks blushing deeply.

"Well, Gracia," he stammered uneasily, "I have something to say to you—something that has been troubling my heart this long time; something vital, all-absorbing."

A sigh escaped the girl's lips. She stirred about nervously, as one startled by fear. Slowly Jerome's hand stole into hers. The next moment they were face to face.

"Gracia! Gracia!" he continued. "I can

keep the secret no longer. I must tell you—I must," he trembled. "Gracia—listen to me —I—love—you!"

Then his strong arm stole about her neck. She tried to release herself, but it was too late.

"Gracia, I love you!" he gasped, looking into her beautiful young face.

"You do not mean it, Jerome," she said. "Oh, it seems hardly possible."

"Anything is possible to one who loves," he answered, drawing her closer to him. "From that first day on which you came to me for your lesson I have loved you, Gracia. I often tried to forget you, but it was impossible. When I was lonely, your sweet face rose before me and cheered me; when I was discouraged, your clear voice always brought to my ear some consoling message. Wherever I went you rose before me like some white-souled spirit to lead me on. I was never alone. You were always with me, bound to me by that strong chain of love which time can never destroy. Oh, dearest! I have longed for this blessed hour, and now that it has arrived I am satisfied."

"I, too, feel like uttering some prayer of thanksgiving, Jerome," Gracia began. "How could I help loving you?" she continued. "You are so noble, great and good. I am only an ordinary girl, and you—you are such a noted man of the world."

"You may think yourself only an ordinary girl, Gracia," he interrupted, "but that is your humility. To me you are the greatest, noblest, sweetest woman I have ever known—an angel dropped from the skies, beautiful as the fallen snow and lovely as the stars in the blue heavens. With you always near my life will be a path of roses. Without you it would have been cold and cheerless."

"Ah, Jerome, love is sweet when sanctified upon the altar of a noble heart like yours, and its rose-time is joyous. Oh, I am so happy—so happy! Yes, I love you, dear."

They drew a little closer, and for an instant their lips met in that first, white hour of love's awakening.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Painted Picture.

" I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath
Smiles, tears, of all my life."

—*Mrs. Browning.*

GRACIA hurried home that morning with joy in her soul—the joy felt when some unexpected pleasure suddenly comes into one's life. In her heart she had often longed for the love of Jerome; but she always pictured it as something lying far beyond her grasp, something of which she was unworthy, something that was meant for another. And now, since she had heard his lips speak the words that she had often listened to in dreams, and had felt the pressure of his warm, strong hand, she knew that Love's very heaven had been opened to her at last. Like an innocent, pleasure-loving child, she had entered that place of a thousand delights, where birds madrigaled unceasingly, and flowers lifted their shy, sweet faces to the sun and smiled as she passed by. It was a grand awakening to be so suddenly transported from a world of dreariness and unrest into a haven of peace and happiness. Love had suddenly bright-

ened every dark shadow in her life; it had softened the bird voices into more tender strains, and added a new beauty to sky and land and sea. To her heart it had given the treasures which God bestows upon His children in those first, glad hours of the consecration. It had brought the springtime to her life—the blessed season which, even then, gave promise of gay summers of happiness, bright autumns of hope and noble winters of peace.

Jerome regretted seeing Gracia depart from the studio. He would have liked to have kept her there forever; but what matter, now that she sat enthroned in his heart?

When she was gone he lit a cigar and sank into his easy-chair. For some time his thoughts traced beautiful pictures in the clouds of smoke. He beheld Gracia, in the coming years, helping him faithfully to attain the lofty ideals which the future guarded so zealously; he knew that her love would ever fall upon him as some tender benediction—that strong love of hers which would bridge every difficulty, surmount every obstacle and help him, in his dream of beauty, along the rocky road which finally led to the fields of success beyond.

Presently the old German clock, which Jerome had purchased in his student days at Leipzig, struck the hour of eleven.

"Time flies," he said gaily, "and I must to work."

He rose from his chair and threw his cigar aside carelessly.

"Oh, if that canvas were only done—if Gracia only knew!"

Thoughtfully he walked to the large, open window. For a moment his eyes wandered across the busy street.

"What a beautiful morning!" he exclaimed. "The very breath of poetry seems to linger everywhere. Strange! in every passing face I seem to see Gracia—my Gracia. O best love! great love! my heart burns for thee!"

Then he turned and sat down at his easel, brush and palette in hand, and began his work. There was a smile on his face as he sang lustily—

"Ask me no more where Jove bestows,
When June is past, the fading rose;
For in your beauty's orient deep
Those flowers, as in their causes, sleep.

"Ask me no more whither doth haste
The nightingale when May is past;
For in your sweet divining throat
She winters and keeps warm her note.

"Ask me no more where those stars light
That downward fall in dead of night;
For in your eyes they sit, and there
Fixèd become as in their sphere."

"There, now, that looks better!" he exclaimed, as he lifted his brush from the can-

vas. "I wonder what Gracia will say when she sees the picture. I think it is the best I have ever done, and I do hope it will bring me something from Paris. I am sure Gracia will be surprised. Only a few more finishing touches and then the picture will be done."

For two hours the artist worked faithfully at the canvas, adding those little details which are necessary for the production of a great masterpiece. When he had finished, he rose from his seat, walked back a few yards and faced the picture.

"It is magnificent!" he exclaimed, his heart thrilling with pride. "I am so glad it is finished at last. I feel very tired. And now for a name."

He mused for a moment, thinking deeply. "I have it—I have it!" he cried. "I shall call it 'Love's Blossoming.'"

Then he strode over to the table and rang the little bell.

"Did you ring, Mr. Chelsea?" the maid asked softly.

"Yes, Priscilla. I am very tired. Bring me a cup of strong coffee and a slice of toast. I am not going out to lunch."

"Will coffee and toast be sufficient?"

"Yes, Priscilla. I am not hungry, only tired, and I want something to refresh me, that's all."

When she was gone, Jerome sank into his arm-chair. He ran his fingers through his

dark brown hair, and said thoughtfully: "'Love's Blossoming'—what a beautiful name!" Then a look of intense satisfaction stole to his eyes.

Gracia came to the studio that afternoon for her lesson.

"You are on time, dear," he smiled, as she entered the waiting-room. "I am glad. It seemed days since you were here, and yet it was only this morning."

Then his hand stole silently into hers, and he led her across the room.

"You look tired, Jerome. Are you not feeling well?" Gracia asked nervously, looking into his honest, manly face.

"I am feeling quite well, thank you."

"What have you been doing, dear?"

"I have been painting. I could hardly leave my canvas during the last few days. It haunted me continually, and I was very anxious to finish it. I painted for hours yesterday, and when evening came I still sat at my easel. Later, I went out for a refreshing walk. When I returned, the picture again attracted me; and I worked until after midnight. When I fell asleep the morning sun was just rising."

"No wonder, then, that you look tired," Gracia said pityingly. "I am afraid you are forgetting the laws of the conservation of energy."

"Perhaps, but my life seemed to be in the

picture. It has taken me two months, dear, to give expression to a desire my heart has treasured for days; and now all the striving and longing is at an end. The picture is finished, and it is the best I have yet done. A prize from Paris, and then my happiness will be complete."

"You intend sending it abroad?"

"Yes, dear. Space has been reserved for me in the leading art gallery of Paris for six pictures, and this shall be one of them."

"This is all news to me, Jerome," Gracia exclaimed with surprise. "You have been at work upon the picture for two months and you never mentioned the matter to me."

"I dared not, Gracia, but now—"

"That seems strange," she interrupted. "You dared not? I hardly know what you mean. What is the name of the canvas?"

"'Love's Blossoming,'" he replied.

"What a sweet name! Your pictures are always well named, Jerome. You display great taste in this matter. How did you happen to choose such a pretty one?"

"It was an inspiration, dear. The christening took place but a few hours ago, just as—"

He did not finish the sentence; and Gracia wondered why he was so reticent.

"I do not understand you, Jerome. Come, tell me all about it—and please finish your sentences."

A troubled look stole into her eyes.

"Come, Gracia," he exclaimed, "let us see the picture first. It will speak for itself."

He led her into the workshop, where the canvas stood just as he had left it.

Gracia sprang forward with a thrill of delight, and Jerome followed slowly.

"Oh, Jerome—it is beautiful!" she cried, her eyes wandering over the great masterpiece.

Then her cheeks grew pale. She turned and faced him, and her lips trembled.

The picture was a creation in soft, subdued color, a garden scene with the spring full upon it. A clear, blue sky smiled above, and shadows shone everywhere. In the foreground stood a number of rosebushes, and bending over one of them was a woman in white, beautiful and youthful-looking. In her fingers she held a red, blossoming rose. Her eyes were gazing into the very soul of the opening flower. They had a heavenly look in them—the light of love, clear and sweet beyond all understanding.

The woman in white was no other than Gracia.

"Why did you not tell me of this weeks ago?" she asked tenderly.

"Because I dared not. I loved you; but it was too early. Love's blossoming had not yet come."

CHAPTER XXIII.

Sister Benita.

"The light upon her face
Shines from the windows of another world.
Saints only have such faces."

—*Longfellow.*

"I AM so glad to see you, Gracia."

It was a woman's voice that sounded in the neat, plainly furnished room—Sister Benita's, bright, musical and cheery.

In the height of her happiness, after her lesson at the studio, Gracia had gone to St. Agatha's, to pour out her inmost feelings to Sister Benita. These visits to the convent on the hill were of a very informal nature. To Gracia they were special feasts of delight. She loved to be near Sister Benita. She was so different to the other women with whom she came in contact daily. Always sympathetic and kind, the nun possessed qualities of heart and mind which make for greatness —noble, uplifting traits which are given to those only who live pure and virtuous and exemplary lives.

Tall and distinguished-looking, Sister Benita was, above all else, a beautiful woman. As she glided through the room, one could only think of her as a saint—a woman set far

above the world's common lot, whose heart was filled with love for the Creator, and whose life was a grand poem of self-denial and holy living. The parting sunbeams wandered lazily over her snowy guimpe. Her clear, crystal eyes were filled with an almost celestial light, and a pleasant smile was always on her face. Gracia thanked God inwardly that there was a Sister Benita, and that she lived very close to her own heart.

"Let us go out into the open, Gracia," the nun remarked sweetly, in a soft, musical voice, before the girl had time to sit down. "I think it is rather close in here. Besides, it is so refreshing to be out-of-doors when spring is in the air. I have been fenced in all afternoon in the class-room, and just long for a breath of fresh air. So come, dear!"

They drifted out of the room into the pleasant park which faced the quiet street. The various paths were all well kept, and the newly made flower-beds showed that the nuns were already busy preparing for the coming of the flowers.

"Has not this been a delightful day, auntie?" Gracia remarked, as the two walked down one of the narrow paths. From childhood, Gracia had always called Muriel auntie, and this appellation clung to the latter still, even now that she was Sister Benita.

"Yes, it has been a charming day," an-

swered the nun. "See! the Sisters are at work over there. They have just finished the last flower-bed. Do you notice the little nun bending over? That is Sister Beatrice, the oldest nun in the community."

"Ah, yes, I remember her. I met her a year or so ago."

"Think of it, she is almost a hundred years old, and yet she is as active as any of us. She has had charge of these flower-beds for over forty years."

"Come, let us go over to her," said the girl, eagerly. "It seems so long since we met. I think she is a darling woman. Old people do so inspire me. I can always see a heavenly halo about them."

Sister Benita and Gracia went across the lawns that were turning green in the quickening spring air. Soon they stood face to face with Sister Beatrice. The nuns had, in the meantime, left the park, bent upon other errands, and Sister Beatrice was, therefore, alone.

"Well, Sister, I see you are still busy with your flowers," Sister Benita remarked. "You must be tired."

The old nun raised herself straight as an arrow, a look of ineffable sweetness upon her wrinkled face.

"Tired? Ah, no, Sister," she exclaimed happily. "I never grow tired. Why should

I weary of my work, when it is all done in the name of the Master? I do not know what I would do without my flowers here. They have gladdened my heart these many long years; and when spring comes speeding across the hills my place is out here in the fresh air and the sunshine."

"She is a second Matt Pensy," thought Gracia.

"Do you remember the young lady I have with me?" asked Sister Benita.

"Let me see," the old nun said, straightening her glasses. "Why, to be sure, it's Gracia Gravenor. How are you, my child?" Tenderly she pressed her hand in her own. "You are growing into a fine young woman, Gracia. How old are you?"

"I shall soon be twenty," the girl remarked shyly.

"Twenty," Sister Beatrice said slowly, "well, well! And all your young life still before you."

"Time flies," interrupted Sister Benita, "the months pass on, and we grow older and wiser with them."

"Some day, Sister," smilingly spoke the old nun, "Gracia will come to St. Agatha's and become one of us."

"Would that your wish might come true!" sighed Sister Benita.

Just then Gracia's thoughts stole to the

quaint studio, and the image of Jerome rose before her eyes as in a mist, strong and manly-looking. The memory of all that had occurred made her heart glad. A little half-suppressed smile came to her face, and she answered:

"Perhaps, some day, when I am world-weary and this *wanderlust* is over, I shall come and seek rest within these walls. But, for the present, I know the Master has other plans in store for me."

A strange look came into Sister Benita's eyes. "What does the child mean?" she wondered. "She will tell me all before she leaves."

"Whatever your course in life may be, Gracia," comfortingly remarked Sister Beatrice, "may God bless you and keep you from all harm! Strong, loving, pure-hearted women are needed in the world now, more than ever. These are evil days, my child, and the heart of humanity is grief-stricken. Society has placed a monster upon her throne and labelled her—woman. But she is a prey to all the evil influences of her times. What we want are pure-hearted, hopeful women, who carry in their hearts a love for innocent little children, and in their souls an abiding principle of right living and truth. The mothers of men are fighting the battles of to-day, Gracia, and to them God looks for

the regeneration of the human race. If you are destined to take your place amongst this noble fighting army, remember your responsibilities, child, and God will bless you!"

There was a comforting note in all that the old nun had said, and it sank deeply into Gracia's heart. Sister Beatrice had been quite a thinker and reader in her day. She had probed deeply into the mysteries of life and its sane philosophy; and her bird-like, cheery messages went to the girl's heart, carrying with them love and hope and peace.

Presently the Angelus sounded from the high belfry of St. Agatha's. The bells had a joyous peal in them. To Gracia they brought a sense of peace that seemed almost supernatural. Slowly and reverently she sank upon her knees, beside the silent, kneeling figures of the two women, and poured out her prayer to God.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Gracia Confides.

'But happy they! the happiest of their kind,
Whom gentle stars unite, and in one fate
Their hearts, their fortunes and their beings blend."
—*Thomson.*

SISTER BENITA knew that Gracia carried a secret in her heart which she would be pleased to impart to another. Something had come over the girl since her last visit to St. Agatha's, and the nun was determined to find out what it was.

"You look somewhat troubled, Gracia," Sister Benita began.

"Not troubled exactly, auntie. I am happy, very happy, but—"

Gracia raised her face to the nun's gaze, and for a moment her lips were silent.

"You remember me saying but a moment ago, auntie, that the Master had other plans in store for me—"

"Yes, child, I remember distinctly. I had always set my heart upon your coming here some day. It is so beautiful to be far from the world's wickedness and sin. I have been a mother to you these many years, and am anxious for your safety. Were I out in the

world I could easily follow your footsteps; but—"

"Never mind, auntie, I shall not go astray so long as I possess the love of Jerome—"

"What do you mean, child?"

"I mean, auntie, that I love Jerome Chelsea, the artist. He is good and honest, and we have sworn to be true to each other for life."

"Jerome Chelsea, the artist who painted the pictures in our chapel? I know him very well."

"Yes, he is the man."

Sister Benita moved about nervously. The surprise had been very great. In her heart she felt pleased.

"I am glad," she said, "that love has found you such a charming young man. A man who can paint such beautiful angel-faces and such charming, heavenly Madonnas must in his heart possess many admirable qualities, my dear. He is an artist; and I know your love for pictures and beautiful things. Gracia, I am satisfied with the man of your choice."

"Thanks, a thousand times!" the girl whispered faintly. Then her hand fell into the nun's lap, and for a time the tears ran fast, but they were the tears that always come in the supreme moments of joy.

For the next half hour the girl poured out her inmost thoughts to the kind nun.

When, later, Sister Benita kissed her good-bye at the old-fashioned convent gate, there was a motherly tone in her voice as she said: "Now, dear, be a good and prudent girl. You have much to live for."

When Gracia raised her hand in parting, the nun saw a bright glimmer on one of her delicate fingers.

Sister Benita took her hand in hers, and quickly examined the precious diamond which Gracia had tried so hard to conceal.

"Ah, I see, my dear!" she exclaimed. "It is beautiful, and may I ask who has been so good as to present you with it?"

Sister Benita thought that it might have been a gift from Aunt Hawkins.

Gracia lowered her eyes for a moment, and her cheeks blushed deeply as she answered in the faintest whisper:

"It is my engagement ring. Jerome gave it to me only this afternoon."

The nun smiled good-naturedly and said: "Congratulations, child! I am sure you are pleased the contract is closed and sealed. And now for the sound of wedding bells—wedding-bells, Gracia!"

"Not yet! not yet!" the girl replied joyously. "You shall be the first to hear the date."

"Do not wait too long, my dear," the nun remarked, as Gracia closed the old convent gate behind her.

"I wonder what that mysterious letter in the little casket is all about?" Sister Benita mused as she retraced her steps to her room. "There was a strange look in my brother's eyes when, years ago, he commissioned me to take charge of the enclosed letter, and begged me to read it to the girl on her twentieth birthday. What is the meaning of it all? Read it to her on her twentieth birthday! It does seem very strange to me. Only a few months, and Gracia will be twenty. Then I shall have to fulfil my promise."

CHAPTER XXV.

Jerome's Opportunity.

"His pencil was striking, resistless and grand,
His manners were gentle, complying and bland;
Still born to improve us in every part—
His pencil our faces, his manners our heart."
—*Goldsmith.*

Two months later, Sister Benita was again seated in the plain convent reception room, indulging in quiet conversation with two callers. They were Gracia Gravenor and Jerome Chelsea. Love had drawn the hearts of the latter so closely together that they were thinking of a not far-distant day which was to bring them the realization of all their most hopeful wishes—that day into which could be crowded all life's endless years of sorrow and suffering.

Only the day before, Jerome had sent Sister Benita a beautiful painting as a gift to St. Agatha's. It was a picture of Christ as a child of six, sitting in a far-off eastern garden of flowers and shadows, His Mother bending over Him tenderly, book in hand, teaching Him some little helpful lesson, a look of hopeful yearning upon her noble face.

"Thanks very much, Mr. Chelsea, for that beautiful picture," the Sister said, after a few

minutes. "It was very good of you. We are all in love with it, and my pupils fairly rave over it. It is so life-like and original. We have set it up in the art room, where everyone can see it. The Cardinal, too, admired it this morning. He thought the idea a pretty one, and asked me the artist's name. I told him, and he expressed a desire to meet you, Mr. Chelsea."

"The Cardinal saw the picture?" Jerome asked. "And he liked it? Well, I'm so glad—the dear old man. It was very good of him to say so much. Do you know, Sister, I, too, would like to meet His Eminence."

"That can be accomplished very easily. We expect him for a recital at three, and, if he is not hurried, I will arrange for a meeting."

Sister Benita knew the Cardinal was intending to have the whole interior of his cathedral decorated in oil. He had seen Jerome's work in the chapel, and had praised it frequently. No wonder, then, that she was anxious to arrange this meeting. Besides, he had mentioned several artists from amongst whom the fortunate man was to be selected. She had never heard him mention Jerome's name, yet in her heart she hoped he might yet be the Cardinal's choice.

"I appreciate your kindness very much, Sister," Jerome said gratefully. "It is very

good of you, but I tremble at the thought of meeting the great Cardinal."

"You need have no fear, Mr. Chelsea," she replied. "His Eminence is the plainest and humblest of men. Everybody loves him. He is so good and kind. He is a father to all."

"And has the heart of a child," Gracia interrupted. "I have met him frequently. He always takes such an interest in everything I do."

"Then you will have news for him to-day, I am sure," Sister Benita added smilingly.

"Certainly, auntie," the girl answered, "and he shall know all, even to the ringing of the wedding-bells. I intend asking him to marry us. Do you think he will refuse?"

"No, child," the nun replied tenderly. "He could never refuse a Gravenor. The Cardinal and my father were the best of friends. They say he called daily to see him when he was ill. They were like two brothers, almost—partners of a friendship that was strong and abiding. But when are the wedding-bells to ring, Gracia?"

Gracia's eyes stole over to Jerome, and for an instant the two exchanged smiles. Presently the latter came to the girl's rescue.

"A month from to-day, Sister," he said gladly. "We are to be married the twenty-third of June."

"The month of roses and true lovers' bliss," interrupted Gracia.

"The twenty-third of June," thoughtfully repeated the nun—"the day following your birthday, child."

"Yes, I shall be twenty then."

"Twenty years!" repeated Sister Benita, a shadow creeping silently over her face. "How time flies!"

Then for a few minutes her thoughts dwelt upon the mysterious letter in the iron casket.

"I am sure it will bring gladness to the young girl's heart," she mused. "On his deathbed Arthur asked me to be good to the child for his sake. For his sake! I wonder why?"

Sister Benita seemed troubled, yet she was most anxious not to show her present feelings, therefore she said in the sweetest voice: "I rejoice with you both that the day is near at hand. Love, when sanctified by grace and blessed by God, is a great and a noble gift; and I am glad to know you are both possessors of the priceless jewel."

She came near telling them about her brother's letter, but decided that it was best not to do so for the present.

"I have a favor to ask of Mother Bertille, auntie," Gracia exclaimed. "Do you think she will grant it?"

"I hardly know. It all depends upon what it is."

"Well, I am going to ask her permission to take you home. I want you to be with me on my birthday and on my wedding day. You have not seen Bleur House for years."

"I would like to see the old place again," the nun said gladly, "the blessed home with its tender and clinging memories; but you know, dear, we seldom leave these convent walls."

"I know, but I must have you—and I am going to succeed. Can I see Reverend Mother now?" she pleaded.

"Yes, child. I shall ring for her."

"No, never mind. I shall find her. Where is she?"

"In the music-room, I believe."

"Then I shall go to her. Cardinal Richelieu once said, 'In all the bright lexicon of youth there is no such word as *fail*,' and I am going to succeed."

"I hope so."

When she was gone, Sister Benita turned to her visitor.

"Do you know, Mr. Chelsea," she began, "I really believe Gracia will win Mother over—the little imp! However, I should be so glad to be with both of you on that day of days."

There was a momentary silence, and she

continued: "I suppose you find your work very trying, Mr. Chelsea. I tire of the brush frequently, and very often the smell of paint is really nauseating to me."

"It is not so with me. During the act of creating I am happy. I fairly long to see the pictures of my fancy come to life on the canvas; and yet, when the work is done, I am exhausted and ambitionless. I have had a busy winter and spring of it, and I long to get out into the open, far away from my work-shop for a little while."

"I am sure a holiday would do you a great deal of good."

"I know it, Sister, and I intend going away. I have almost decided to leave to-morrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes; you see, I intend remaining away three weeks. This will leave me a week to prepare for the wedding."

"And pray may I ask where you intend going?"

"I am going to the Place o' Pines. They say it is a pretty spot."

"You will not be disappointed. It is a garden of roses."

"Were you ever there, Sister?"

"Yes, years before I entered the convent, I went there with my brother and enjoyed the stay immensely. The scenery is perfect—a rare delight to an artist's eye. It is summer

all the year round at the Place o' Pines. Do you intend doing any sketching or painting there?"

"I do not, Sister. It would not be much of a rest for me then. But I intend to do some hunting."

"The pine woods are full of game. I remember, when I was there, hunting was rare sport for the men. Are you going alone, Mr. Chelsea?"

"No, my good friend Dick Freer accompanies me."

"That will be very nice indeed."

Just then the door opened and Gracia entered, her face beaming with smiles.

"'Tis all settled, auntie, dear!" she exclaimed, taking the nun's hand in her own. "Just think of it, Mother Bertille has granted permission and—"

"Really?" interrupted Sister Benita. "I can hardly believe it. I consider it an extraordinary favor."

"And so do I," added Gracia. "I told you I would succeed. Remember, you are going to spend two whole days at Bleur House. Thank God for it! A carriage will bring and take you back safely each night."

"Mother Bertille is very gracious indeed to grant me such an unexpected pleasure. I shall live the past all over again. To me it was a cold, cheerless country. Now it is alive

with the song of birds, and warm with memory's sunshine."

"They will all be delighted to have you there. Poor Aunt Hawkins and Matt Pensy will not close their eyes in expectation for nights when I tell them the good news."

A little silver-toned gong sounded in the hall outside.

"It is time for the recital," Sister Benita remarked. "Come, we have special music this afternoon. Some of the pupils are going to sing. I shall see, Mr. Chelsea, that you meet the Cardinal."

Thirty minutes later, His Eminence joined the little group in the waiting-room. He was a man in the seventies, distinguished and benign-looking. Tall and full of majesty and graceful of motion, he looked like a ruler amongst men.

The son of a distinguished diplomat, he was able and cultured.. His face had a thoughtful, almost a serious, look upon it, and he possessed piercing black eyes. His snowy hair glistened a silvery white from under his little red cap.

"Well, Gracia," he exclaimed tenderly, as he came across the room and took her by the hand, "I am glad to see you. You look as cheerful as ever, child."

Then Sister Benita introduced Jerome to

the distinguished dignitary. A slight blush stole to the artist's face as he stepped forward.

"Your Eminence—Mr. Jerome Chelsea, the artist!" the nun said calmly.

The two shook hands, and the Cardinal sat down.

"Be seated, Mr. Chelsea," His Eminence said thoughtfully. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance. I understand you decorated the chapel here at St. Agatha's. I have often admired your artistic skill. Only this morning Sister Benita showed me 'The Garden and the Child,' which you so kindly donated to the institution. Since then I have been impressed more than ever with the promise of your work. Have you been in Kempton long?"

"About a year, your Eminence."

"It seems strange we should never have met until now," the red-robed Cardinal said calmly. "However, it is better late than never. I am glad your work is earning such favorable criticisms. I often come across your name in the art journals from the Continent."

The Cardinal was a deep student of art and an admirer of the lofty, artistic spirit which makes for the uplift of humanity.

"I am intending," he continued, "to have the cathedral decorated in oil. I have thought out a color scheme, and I think you are the

man to give expression to the idea. Are you willing to undertake such a task?" he asked kindly.

Gracia and Sister Benita exchanged glances, expressions of intense joy written upon their faces.

"With all my heart, your Eminence," the artist answered gladly.

"Then, Mr. Chelsea, you may call at the Palace, and we will talk the matter over. I suppose you will be able to start shortly?"

"Well—well—" the artist stammered nervously. He hardly knew what to say; but, in that moment of mortification, Sister Benita came to his rescue and answered:

"Your Eminence, Mr. Chelsea leaves tomorrow for a three weeks' trip to the Place o' Pines, and on his return he is to be married."

"To be married?" interrupted the Cardinal. "And pray to whom?"

"To Gracia," came the nun's quick reply.

"Well, well! This is a surprise," the Cardinal remarked. "I thought I read a secret in Gracia's eyes when I entered; but after all what does a poor old Cardinal know of such things? However, I rejoice with you, children, and I will gladly hold over the decorating of the cathedral until you two are settled in your own house."

"Will your Eminence grant a request?" Gracia pleaded earnestly. "Pardon me if I

appear bold, but will your Eminence officiate at the ceremony? We should be the proudest people in the world."

There was silence for a few moments. Then the Cardinal said: "I cannot refuse you, my children. For the sake of my old departed friend, William Gravenor, and the strong, abiding memories which that friendship still gives me, I shall be only too glad to pronounce the words which will bless your union."

Then he shook hands with the two lovers.

"God bless you both!" he said as he left the room, gathering his red cloak about him.

Sister Benita was elated. The proposed work at the cathedral would help the young artist materially. It would add another jewel to his crown of success.

Gracia, too, in her heart of hearts felt glad that Jerome had received this sudden recognition.

"He is the Cardinal's choice. Think of it!" Sister Benita whispered to her as she kissed her good-bye at the convent door. "I am glad for both your sakes."

CHAPTER XXVI.

In the Pine Woods.

"O ye, good women, it is hard to leave
The paths of Virtue, and return again;
What if this sinner wept, and none of you
Comforted her? But I beseech
Your patience. Once, in old Jerusalem,
A woman kneeled at consecrated feet,
Kissed them and washed them with her tears. What then?
I think that yet our Lord is pitiful,
I think I see the castaway e'en now."

—*Jean Ingelow.*

JEROME CHELSEA and his chum, Dick Freer, arrived at the Place o' Pines, eagerly longing for the pleasures which the famous resort was to afford them. They had been friends, tried and true, for many years; and this holiday trip, previous to Jerome's intended marriage, would give both a much-needed relaxation from sterner and more strenuous duties. They had met several years before in Paris. Jerome was pursuing his studies in art. By mere chance he had met Dick in one of the *cafes chantants*. The latter had come to the French capital in order to study the banking systems in vogue on the Continent, previous to taking over his father's institution at Kempton. Later, letters—gentle breathers of a strong friendship—travelled to

and fro continually from Kempton to Paris; and soon after Jerome opened a studio in Kempton.

Dick Freer, who had already lived twenty-three years of his life, was one of the rising young men of Kempton. Manager of one of the largest banks in the city, his name was highly respected in commercial circles. His father, too, was considered one of the wealthiest men in the place, and some day Dick was to become heir to all his wealth, for he was an only child.

A week passed quickly at the Place o' Pines for the two friends. It had been a week of genuine comfort and rest. Jerome revelled in the riotous changes of color that moved slowly along the distant, wide range of hills from dawn until sunset. His eyes gladly drank in the majestic glory that lay peacefully upon the miles of wide, embracing sea and the acres of lordly pine forest. He really beheld June at her loveliest, the breath of sighing winds on her lips, the glimmer of roses in her cheeks, and the sudden glory of long, languorous, moonlit nights beaming in her eyes. How his artist soul longed to give expression to the pictures that loomed continually before him! But no! he had left brush and palette behind in Kempton, and had promised himself not to indulge in his favorite occupation until some time after his marriage.

The enchanting, lingering beauty of the scenes his eyes witnessed would not so soon be forgotten. The clear, solemn dawns, the warm, golden afternoons, the peaceful, crimson dusks and the bewitching, starry nights, in all their dazzling display of color and atmosphere—the vision of all these would some day be transferred to canvas—some day when Gracia and he would live gloriously together as man and wife.

He could not forget Gracia, girl of his affections. Beautiful and pure, she was the priestess who kept his heart's fires ever bright. He wandered in imagination with her continually through leafy avenues of sunshine and shadow. Go where he might, she rose before him like some white-robed angel, and each time he thought her more lovable, more beautiful. And in many a careless, singing brook he caught the music of her voice, clear, soft and consoling.

"Ah, my pretty one—my little singing bird!" he would often exclaim to himself. "Soon I will take you home to your own nest. I cannot understand it at all. Thousands and thousands of miles divide us, and yet I never feel lonely. Your presence always seems near."

One morning, after breakfast, he sat on one of the balconies of the hotel, reading his paper.

Dick soon appeared on the scene.

"What's new to-day?" the latter asked, sinking into the chair beside him.

"Nothing much," Jerome answered. "These foreign papers do not interest me. I wish the Kempton *Chronicle*. were here. Somehow or other I feel just a little lonely this morning. I seem to long for the old place."

"Cheer up, Jerome—don't grow morbid! It's not becoming to you. Let's shoulder our rifles and make for the pine woods. They tell me there is fine shooting."

"Has the morning mail arrived, Dick?" he asked absent-mindedly.

"Yes; I think it must be distributed now. But what about going hunting? This is a fine, clear morning."

"No one is finding fault with the weather, Dick, but somehow or other I don't feel exactly right here," pointing to his heart. "Everything seems to be out of place."

He had been waiting almost daily for a letter from Gracia, but alas! the longed-for missive had not arrived. His heart was beginnning to have strange misgivings. Gracia had promised him faithfully to write the day after he left Kempton; but she had not fulfilled her promise. A whole week had passed now and there were no signs of a letter.

"Come, Jerome. Stop your dreaming!" said Dick. "I shall get the rifles ready, eh?"

"Very well, then, but I would like to look over my morning's mail before leaving."

"Then I shall get it for you down stairs."

"Thanks."

Ten minutes later, Dick arrived with a bundle of papers and letters.

"See here, Jerome," he exclaimed gladly, "this is all for you. The office clerk, noticing my awkwardness in housing the mail, laughingly offered the services of a mail-bag and an elevator. So you see you are getting to be quite a man of importance, receiving letters and papers by the armful. Surely you are not going to wade through all those papers. It will be night before you finish, and our day's sport in the woods will be an unrealized desire."

"Have patience just a few minutes! I merely want to see the letters. Here's one from Paris, a few from London, and here's the Cardinal's haidwriting."

His fingers moved on hurriedly, and, when he read the postmark on the last letter, a look of disappointment stole into his face.

"Pshaw! confound it anyway! I'll not go shooting to-day, Dick. I am sorry, but I am down and out. I feel disgusted with myself."

"Perhaps this, then, will cheer your spirits,

Jerome," Dick said smilingly, as he drew forth a letter from his pocket. "I think it is the one you have been waiting for, the one with the scent of rose perfume, the only one from—" He did not finish the sentence, but he knew the handwriting too well to be mistaken.

"You wretch—you sly fox!" cried Jerome. "And you dared be so cruel as to keep it from me!"

Eagerly he scanned the handwriting. A smile came to his eyes and he exclaimed in the fullness of joy: "Thank God! it has come at last—from Gracia! Dick, I'll hunt with you all day if you like. Gracia is well and happy."

He gave a sigh of relief, and all his heavy thoughts and feelings disappeared.

"You poor, love-sick boy," Dick remarked teasingly. "I am glad for your sake that the letter has again put your heart in its right place. I think you got over the dislocation quickly, and that, too, without the aid of surgeon or chloroform."

"Love, my dear fellow, overcomes every difficulty," Jerome answered with a smile. "In my case, you see, she was nurse, surgeon, anæsthetist, all in one. Some day, Dick, you will be the victim. Then it will be my turn to laugh."

Just then the clock struck the hour of ten.

"Come, let's off to the woods," Jerome exclaimed with an outburst of enthusiasm. "I long for the breath of the wild pines."

Soon they were off, their rifles on their shoulders, eager for a day's sport. An hour later they stood in the very midst of the pine woods—that vast cathedral of green and shadow.

"See here, Dick," cried Jerome, somewhat nervously, "there's blood trickling down this large rock. I wonder what it means."

In a moment Dick was at his side, and together they watched the little stream of blood trickling slowly into the valley where they were standing.

"Some animal or bird must be lying on top somewhere," said Dick, "bleeding to death—a victim of a sportsman's bullet."

"Very likely," rejoined Jerome, "but it seems to me a bird would hardly lose so much blood. See! the stream is running faster now. Let's climb the rock and trace it to its source. What do you say, Dick?"

"It will be quite interesting to do so. Here's rather a strong tree. It will carry us, and from some of its branches we will be able to swing to the top of the rock."

The next moment the two men's bodies were swaying on the tree's branches. They mounted higher and higher, slowly and cautiously. Presently Jerome stepped to the top.

"At last! at last!" he exclaimed. "Quick, give me your hands and I'll pull you up, Dick. If you should slip or the branch should break, it would mean certain death. So come, I'll pull hard."

Then, with the strength of ten, Jerome landed Dick, who was struggling to gain his breath.

"See here," cried Jerome, "this blood seems to be running from the little stream yonder."

For a moment they stood gazing into the stream that flowed on lazily. "By Jove!" exclaimed Dick, "I swear the water is the color of blood!"

"What can it mean?" asked Jerome, puzzled. "Let us follow it up farther."

They felt something stirring in the high grass ahead of them.

"At last we have reached the spot," Dick said with satisfaction. "The water seems to be getting redder."

"I seem to hear sighing—the sound of living breath," Jerome whispered, trembling. "Come on, Dick!"

Again they saw something dark stirring in the grass.

"It must be some wounded animal," said Dick, "that cannot leave the spot for the loss of blood."

Slowly, and with strange misgivings, they drew closer.

"Great heavens!" shrieked Jerome. "It is a human being—a woman. Come, Dick, quick, for goodness' sake!"

The woman was kneeling beside the brook bathing her head in the water. The blood oozed out of several wounds in her scalp, and she seemed very weak.

Quickly they lifted her back, and instantly Dick made pressure over the scalp wounds with his handkerchief. The woman's face was thin and pale. Its many wrinkles seemed to indicate either suffering or crime. Her gray hair testified that she was well up in years, and her shabby clothes and general appearance proved plainly that she lived in poverty. She stirred for a moment and then stretched herself full length upon the grass. Her lips were bloodless and her eyes were closed. She seemed to be unconscious.

"There has been foul play here, Dick," remarked Jerome. "Here is the axe."

He bent over and lifted it from the ground. It was stained with blood.

"I am sure the woman has been murdered," cried Dick. "She has been done to death with that axe."

The woman opened her eyes. She struggled to gain her speech, but seemed unable to collect her thoughts. Presently her lips moved. A lucid interval had come, her mind was clear, and she spoke with difficulty, in the faintest whisper, slowly but distinctly:

"Murdered? Ah, no! Do not say that. There has been no murder. I came to cut down some small trees for wood. I gather my own fuel in these parts. There is my axe, in your hand. I stumbled and fell and hurt my head, and the blood came."

"How long have you been lying here?" questioned Jerome.

"Not very long. I do not know. I feel so strange!"

"Do you live near here?"

"Yes, in a little cottage, a half mile or so from here."

"Then we shall carry you home."

She raised her hand as if to ward them off. "No, you must not," she said. "I am going to die here."

"But you are not going to die." Dick spoke kindly.

"The end is not far off," the woman answered, trembling. "The blood flowed too freely, and I am so weak."

Jerome lifted her head slightly from the grass. It was cold and clammy. Then, with the other hand, he kept pressure on the wound.

"I am so glad you came, gentlemen," she continued, the tears flowing down her cheeks. "I am so glad—so glad!"

"Pray," questioned Jerome, "will you tell us who you are? Perhaps we can find your friends."

"Friends?" questioned the old woman. "I have none. I am all alone in the world. My life has been a record of crime and degradation." She halted a moment as if to catch her breath. "The world about the Place o' Pines knows me well. I was a companion of thieves and murderers."

She moved about uneasily. The two men saw that she was growing weaker.

"I have lived a life of sin and shame," she said again, her speech coming interruptedly, "and now I know my minutes are numbered. I beg God's forgiveness for all my sins. I am sorry, heartily sorry, for all the wrongs I have done. If, O God, it is not too late, cleanse this soul of its guilt by washing it in the fountains of Thy mercy! Gentlemen, you have come at the right hour. I am dying—I know, I feel it. Before I go, I would like to make a confession to you which will startle the people around here. Publish it in all the corners of the island. I am sorry for my share in the crime. It has been a mystery to the people long enough. Friends, one of you, take down every word on paper. Hurry! I would like to speak while my memory is yet clear."

Jerome, pencil in hand, sank on his knees and waited breathlessly for the dying woman's words.

At last she began in a faint, trembling voice:

"On my deathbed, here in the pine woods, in the presence of you two gentlemen, I wish to unravel the mystery surrounding the Lescot tragedy which has puzzled the dwellers about here for nearly seventeen years. Mazie Lescot's three-year-old child was not murdered, but stolen; and I, God forgive me, did the act at the instigation of a certain wealthy man from Kempton, who paid me well for my trouble."

Jerome and Dick exchanged glances for a moment, roused to the highest pitch of excitement.

"This strange man," the woman continued, "came to my cottage one night, wearing a red wig. I saw it was a disguise. He did not tell me his name, but on his purse I read—'*Arthur Gravenor, Kempton.*'"

"Arthur Gravenor, Kempton!" shrieked Jerome, almost wildly. "Gracia's uncle—Sister Benita's brother! What does it all mean?"

There was a look of terror in his eyes.

The dying woman did not notice Jerome's interruption. She seemed anxious to finish her story, and continued: "I entered Mazie Lescot's house, stole her little daughter, Constance, and carried her to the bend of the river, where Gravenor met me. He chloroformed the child, embarked on the steamer and left the Place o' Pines that same evening,

taking the child with him. I heard of his death soon after. I have often wondered since what became of Constance. Mrs. Lescot died within twenty-four hours, of a broken heart, thinking her child had been murdered. So you see Mazie Lescot's child was not murdered—murdered, I repeat—but stolen by this wretch who realized, too late, what it means to tear hearts asunder. And now, O God, I am sorry for all my crimes—"

The words came slower and fainter: "I wish that I had lived a better life. There was once a Magdalen, and Thou, my Creator, didst bless her. This gives me courage—and hope!—Lord—forgive—me!"

She paused for a moment, lingering upon the sentences her cold lips had just uttered.

"Raise—my—head—quickly," she gasped. "I—can—hardly—catch—my—breath. The—pencil—Let—me—sign. Quick!—before—it—is—too—late!"

She breathed heavily, death staring coldly out of her cheerless eyes. With trembling fingers she signed the written document.

"There—" she gasped, "it—is—finished. Thank God!—Mad Nance—dies happy!"

Her head sank on Jerome's arm. Her eyes opened staringly. There was a slight twitching at the lips, and then the struggle was over.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Dark Clouds in Clear Skies.

"At one stride comes the dark."
—*Coleridge.*

"POOR creature!" Jerome remarked, as he looked into the dead woman's face. "It seems strange that they should have called her Mad Nance, for in death her face looks even beautiful."

"I am sure God has forgiven the poor woman her crimes," said Dick, tenderly. "There was such a look of peace in her eyes when she breathed her last—the peace that comes when the heart is suddenly released from all its cares."

Jerome looked troubled. The strange document he held in his hands, which bore the dead woman's signature, fairly set his mind ablaze with burning thoughts. He decided, however, not to say very much to his companion at the present time. What, after all, was there to be said? They had come upon the dying woman providentially, it seemed, yet the mention of Arthur Gravenor's name in connection with the stealing of the Lescot child brought Kempton and the occupants of

Bleur House very near—Gracia especially. However, the present moments were not to be utilized in the exploiting of the strange mystery which hung, for the present, over the memory of the departed mill-owner at Kempton.

"This is a strange predicament," remarked Jerome, nervously. "What shall we do with the dead woman? Surely, people will not judge us rashly, and implicate us for, perhaps, murder! How shall we get out of the difficulty? The woman should be taken away."

"Yes, that is certain, Jerome. Let me see. I shall hurry to town and notify the chief of police, and acquaint him with the circumstances of the case. He will probably bring the coroner with him."

"Go at once and return quickly. I shall keep watch over the dead."

The minutes passed slowly for Jerome as he sat on the stump of an old pine tree awaiting Dick's return. And what lonely, long minutes they were for him!—leading his thoughts down deeper into the strange, vague problem that had been forced so suddenly upon his mind.

His fingers stole nervously to his pocket, and, taking therefrom the signed document, he read it again. A look of terror crept into his

eyes. Slowly and carefully, word for word, he studied the lines. They seemed to haunt him and conjure up the dead. They brought a sense of weariness and uneasiness into his heart, such as he had never experienced. Disgusted and disappointed, he wished that he had never seen the Place o' Pines. Instead of reaping pleasure from his vacation, a wild spirit of unrest had settled over him. Something seemed to be pulling continually at his heart's strings; he hardly knew what it was. The man whom Mad Nance had mentioned as her tempter could be no other than the young mill-owner of Kempton. There had been only one man by that name in the history of the place as far as he knew. Besides, had he not often heard Sister Benita refer to that trip, years ago, to the Place o' Pines when her brother was "so poorly"? A light seemed to dawn on the darkness. Alas! fresh shadows were falling over the path which he had pictured as bright and sunny.

"I am sure," he argued, "the master of Bleur House was guilty of the stealing of the Lescot child; but what motive could he have had for the strange deed? I cannot understand it at all. I wonder what became of the child? It cannot be Gracia. The stolen child's name was Constance. But then he might have changed it for obvious reasons.

Gracia, I know, was an adopted child. She knows nothing of her parents. I have often heard Aunt Hawkins say that she came to them when a little child. Let me see. The Lescot child was three years old. Seventeen years have elapsed since then. Great heavens! Gracia's very age. Only two more weeks and then she will be twenty. God forbid that my surmises are correct! Gracia a stolen child, her mother done to death by the very deed itself, and Arthur Gravenor, the girl's best and greatest benefactor, the instigator of the crime—horrible! horrible! I cannot believe it. What will Sister Benita say when she knows all? Gracia must hear nothing of it. It will only help to darken the brightness of her wedding morn. Stolen or not stolen, to me she is still the most perfect woman on earth. She shall go through life without knowing anything of this strange woman's confession."

Jerome's face had grown deadly pale. He looked sorely troubled. His mind seemed to be battling with a mighty problem. Unknown to himself, the signed document slipped out of his fingers and fell to the grass. Then his head sank into his hands, and for some time he was busy with his thoughts.

Presently footsteps sounded several yards away. Jerome caught the ring of Dick's cheerful voice.

"I am glad they have come at last," he said to himself. "I shall not tell them anything of the old woman's confession. It would only get into the papers, and Arthur Gravenor's good name would be forever blackened. Such publicity would be very distasteful and humiliating to his near relatives at Kempton. Besides, what would it accomplish? The two leading figures in the crime are dead. What could the law do?"

In a few moments the chief of police, the coroner and Dick appeared. The latter related briefly what he knew of the strange death of the woman. Jerome told the same story.

"There is no need for an inquest," said the coroner.

"It's a perfectly clear case," said the chief. "There has been no murder here. No one would have harmed Mad Nance. She has not been dangerous these many years, but she had a pretty bad record at one time. I understand she had reformed greatly."

Then his eyes fell upon a sheet of paper at his feet.

"Ho, ho!—what's this?" he exclaimed, picking it up.

Jerome trembled. He realized, too late, that the paper the chief discovered was no other than Mad Nance's confession. Some-

what confused, he exclaimed: "That belongs to me. I must have dropped it accidentally. Thank you!" he added, as the chief handed it back to him.

"That was a lucky move of mine, Dick, eh?" Jerome said later, as the two retraced their footsteps to the city. "Just think, if that document had fallen into the chief's hands, how mortifying the results would have been."

"It seems a pity that Mr. Gravenor should ever have stooped to this," thoughtfully replied Dick. "I can hardly believe it; and yet Mad Nance told such a seemingly honest story that it cannot be otherwise."

"If the authorities knew, Dick, that we were the fortunate possessors of the facts that would clear up the Lescot mystery, they would hound us until they had forced the secret from our lips. No, they shall never know."

"It is better so."

"Was it not a blessing, after all, that we came upon this woman at the time we did? It seems God led our footsteps to the spot. Had her words fallen upon other ears, the strange confession would not remain a secret. Soon the terrible truth would dawn upon Gracia Gravenor that she was the stolen child, and that the very man whose kindness had fashioned a home for her was indirectly the cause of her mother's death. Poor Gracia!"

"Then, Jerome," interrupted Dick, surprised, "you think Gracia is the Constance spoken of in this document?"

"I am afraid it is only too true," he answered sorrowfully. "Would that God might work a miracle now! But it is too late. It is all so very clear that I cannot drive the thought away."

"If such is the case, then Gracia's brother is probably still alive somewhere on this wide, green earth."

"It is to be hoped that he is," thoughtfully answered Jerome. "I have often heard Gracia regret the fact that she had never known the love and devotion of a brother."

When the two reached the Clarendon, both seemed very tired. Some minutes passed and neither spoke. A tear trembled in Jerome's eye. It seemed to startle him out of his reveries, and he moved about uneasily in his chair.

Dick had been watching his companion's face for some time. When he saw the tears start he knew that, deep down in the artist's heart, there was a gnawing which would not be appeased.

"What is the matter, Jerome?" he asked kindly. "You are not feeling well, are you?"

"No," he answered. "I feel anything but well. This morning's developments have

totally upset me. I see about me nothing but darkness and despair, and oh, how I long for peace! I must away from here, and as soon as possible. What say you, Dick?"

"I shall be satisfied to leave whenever you are ready. In two, twelve or twenty-four hours."

"Then let us start to-night. Would that I could fly to Kempton and—to Gracia!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A Rift of Sunshine.

"The sunshine on my path
Was to me as a friend."
—*Bryant.*

A WEEK later Jerome reached Kempton. The journey home had been a long and wearisome trip. Yet, as he stepped off the train at the depot and caught the twinkle of Gracia's eyes in the crowd, his heart gave a thrill of delight.

"I am so glad, Jerome, to see you back," Gracia said gladly, her cheeks coloring slightly. "It did seem so very lonely since you were gone. Often I thought that you would never return to me. I fancied myself all alone, dear, but that was foolish."

"I, too, have missed you, sweet," Jerome said, looking into her joyful eyes. "I do not know what I would do without you. Your strong, unselfish love seems to fill a void in life that is vast and cheerless. Without you I would miss all the gladness and brightness and sunshine."

"But where is Dick?" asked the girl, somewhat surprised. "Did he not come with you?"

"Yes, part of the way. He remained over at Trantor to see an aged uncle of his. He will reach home the day after to-morrow."

"How did you enjoy yourself, dear? Did the Place o' Pines surpass your expectations?"

Jerome could not help thinking of his meeting with Mad Nance, but brushed the thought aside, and replied: "Yes, I was more than pleased with the place. It is a beautiful country—charming climate, delightful scenery and pleasant company all the time. People are coming and going continually. Whom do you think I had the pleasure of meeting there, Gracia?"

"I hardly know. I suppose some rich duke or duchess."

"Ah, no, come down a little lower on the social scale, please. You surely could not picture me associating with the nobility."

"Why not? My Jerome, I think, is qualified to dine with kings and queens."

"But all jokes aside, I did meet the Duke of Kenyon. He startled all Europe some months ago by openly denouncing and exposing the follies of the smart set. Yes, and a rather fine fellow he is, too. Sings exceptionally well, is an expert at the rifle, and can say his 'ha-penny-damn' as well as any one. The Duke of Kenyon, however, is not the person I had in mind."

"Well, whom else did you meet? Someone great in politics?"

"No."

"In music?"

"No."

"In art?"

"Yes."

"I might have guessed it."

"Listen! I had the pleasure of an evening with the great Lachance."

"Really? An evening with the illustrious Frenchman? Why, all Paris—nay, Europe—is wild over his canvases. I saw a reproduction of one of his latest pictures in one of the art journals. I think it is called 'Shadowland,' a wonderful forest scene of trees and moonlight."

"Ah, yes, I remember it. Do you know, that very picture was executed at the Place o' Pines. I saw the original. Lachance painted it in one of the pine woods. He has been staying at the island for several months. His physician recommended a rest, and yet the noted artist is 'killing time' by painting beautiful and wonderful pictures. Before leaving he presented me with a little landscape in oil—a very pretty bit of work. I know you will like it. By the way, there is another surprise in store."

"Oh, do tell me, please, Jerome, since this is the hour of surprises."

"Lachance will be passing through Kempton in a month or so before leaving for Paris, and he has kindly promised to spend a few days with us."

"With us? You mean with yourself."

"No, I mean 'us.' Surely you are not forgetting, Gracia, that the Cardinal is going to figure conspicuously in a very important ceremony next week."

Gracia lowered her eyes for a moment, and answered with a smile: "Indeed I am not forgetting, dear, but really this 'us' is very confusing, to say the least. Yes, a week from to-day—"

"You shall become my wife," he interrupted. "Thank God for the gift of so sweet a guiding star!"

"All the arrangements for the ceremony have been made. The night before the wedding I shall have a birthday party of my own. I shall be twenty then. Sister Benita is coming home for the two days. It will be glorious. We can hardly wait to see her in the old place. Aunt Hawkins, too, is beside herself for very joy. She has been anxious, planning for weeks. I hardly know what I would do without her. Even poor Matt Pensy has been busy and exceedingly kind. He vows that not a single outside flower will be used in decorating the house and the cathedral. All the floral tributes are destined to

come from the conservatory. Oh, my dear, I have a thousand and one things to tell you. This morning, Madame Landers called and fitted my wedding gown. It is just a perfect gem—a lovely creation of white silk with yards and yards of—"

"Come, dear," Jerome interrupted, somewhat abruptly, "there's a car. It is too far to walk to Bleur House. Besides, I am very tired. Come, let us hurry! You can finish the description of that dress, sweet, when we are seated. I am sure it must be exquisite."

"Exquisite!" she cried gaily, with a certain air of pride. "Why, a queen has seldom worn a prettier or a costlier one."

CHAPTER XXIX.

Unravelling the Tangle.

"Heaven hath a hand in these events."
—*Shakespeare.*

JEROME did not sleep much that evening. There was so much for him to think about, and in his heart he wished that he had never seen the Place o' Pines. The confession of Mad Nance kept him awake nearly all night. He tried to shut out the sound of her dying voice, but he could not. It haunted him as some horrible crime, awful and soul-crushing. What was he to do? He felt that he must tell the truth to someone; but Gracia was not to know. At daybreak he rose from his bed and walked over to the open window. He was very tired. The morning air seemed to revive him. The birds were stirring in the trees, and the streets were already beginning to echo the song of toil.

Presently the bells of St. Agatha's sounded the morning hour. They brought soothing music to his heart and carried his thoughts to that trusted friend of the cloister—Sister Benita. And, while they rang over the roofs of the city, a thought came to him, a bright, helpful thought.

"I have it at last," he muttered. "I shall go to Sister Benita and tell her the story of Mad Nance's death and show her the document. She was at the Place o' Pines with her brother at the time the Lescot child was stolen. Surely she would remember some of the circumstances. Perhaps Arthur told her all about it. In any case, I shall go to her. She seems to be the only person to whom I could relate my experiences."

That morning at ten Jerome Chelsea stood at the door of St. Agatha's.

"Sister Benita is now at class," the portress answered him, "but she will be free in ten minutes. Can you wait so long?"

"Yes; I am in no hurry."

"Very well, then. I shall tell Sister."

Ten minutes later Sister Benita entered the room.

"So you have returned again, Jerome," she remarked. "I am sure one heart in Kempton is glad to-day."

"You mean Gracia?"

"Yes. The poor girl felt very lonely during your absence. She is so affectionate. Her whole life is wrapped up in the forthcoming ceremony. She is as happy as a child."

"I do hope she may ever remain so, bright singing bird that she is. I saw her last evening, and her happiness seemed complete. Aunt Hawkins, too, can hardly wait for your

home-coming, Sister. Remember, you are expected to taste some of Gracia's wedding-cake."

"I shall be there. Reverend Mother is very good to grant such an extraordinary request. It will do my heart good to see the old home again and wander through the well-remembered rooms which are peopled with such pleasant memories. It seems a lifetime since the doors of Bleur House closed behind me. But tell me, how did you like the Place o' Pines? Is it not a rare and delightful spot?"

"It is the most beautiful place I have ever seen. Yet I wish that my foot had never stepped upon its ground."

"What do you mean?" Sister Benita asked, somewhat surprised. "What has happened? You speak strangely, Mr. Chelsea. I felt sure that your trip had been a delightful one. Pray, do not tell me that it was not."

Jerome shifted about uneasily in his chair. Then he looked at Sister Benita strangely.

"Can I trust you, Sister?" he asked doubtfully.

"Trust me, Mr. Chelsea?" questioned the nun, her face whitening. "Certainly. But what does all this mean?"

"I would like to tell you something. I must tell it to someone whom I can trust."

A strange feeling crept into Sister Benita's

heart. She waited for his words with bated breath, like one standing on the brink of a precipice. His sentences had brought a new terror to her soul. She could tell from his looks that there was trouble brewing.

"Speak, Mr. Chelsea," she said, unable to wait any longer, "and tell me all! Trust me. What you are about to say will remain a secret forever. Surely you bring no bad news of the good child, Gracia?" she asked, frightened.

"Not exactly."

"Not exactly!" she repeated. "Tell me, Mr. Chelsea—tell me all!"

"I wish that I had never seen the Place o' Pines," the artist muttered.

"Come, come, Mr. Chelsea, unburden the thoughts that seem to weigh you down. You will feel better afterwards. I know it all concerns Gracia and you."

Jerome regained his courage, and the words came fast. He described the visit to the pine woods, the discovery of the blood trickling down the rocks, the following of the stream to its source, and the finding of Mad Nance in a dying condition.

"But what has Mad Nance to do with either Gracia or yourself?" asked the nun.

"More than you dream. I feel very sorry to have to say it."

"Continue, Mr. Chelsea," the nun pleaded.

Then, in words charged with intense feeling, Jerome referred to the dying woman's confession.

"My dead brother's name was mentioned by this woman as that of her tempter?" shrieked Sister Benita, overcome with emotion.

"Yes; she spoke clearly, and there was no mistaking it."

"How long since the crime was committed?"

"Seventeen years ago."

"What was the nature of the crime?"

"A three-year-old child was stolen by this woman, and your brother paid her well for it."

The nun's hands stole to her throbbing temples.

"Seventeen years ago—seventeen years ago," she repeated. "The very year Arthur and I visited the Place o' Pines."

"Did she give the child's name?"

"Yes—Lescot. The child's mother's name was Mazie."

"Mazie Lescot!" groaned Sister Benita. "Is it possible! And was she at the Place o' Pines?"

"Yes; she was a widow. Her husband was drowned at sea. She sold roses for a living, and they called her the Rose-Queen."

"Mazie Lescot, the widow of Lawrence Lescot," repeated Sister Benita, thoughtfully.

"And she was the Rose-Queen! I knew her well at one time. She lived at Kempton. Her name then was Mazie Rawlins. O God! I see through it all. I am afraid the story is only too true."

"But what motive could your brother have had in stealing the child?"

"Arthur was once madly in love with Mazie, but she spurned his advances and married Lawrence Lescot, a poor mill hand. The blow was too much for him. His mind became affected, and he never recovered. The Lescots left Kempton after their marriage. Providence, however, seemed to have directed that Arthur was to meet Mazie again at the Place o' Pines. They must have met, yet my poor brother breathed not a word."

The tears came to Sister Benita's eyes and she wept bitterly. "Gracia, then, is Mazie Lescot's child," she murmured. "I feel sure of it now!"

She paused for a few moments, while her thoughts wandered back over the past to that last day which she and her brother had spent together at the Place o' Pines. How that day loomed up before her now!

"I am afraid it is all too true, Mr. Chelsea," she repeated sadly.

"Before Mad Nance died," Jerome remarked, "she confessed the crime to Dick and myself, and bade me take down her sentences

word for word. Here is the document. She signed her name just before she died. Read it aloud, Sister."

Jerome handed her the strange document.

"I cannot read it, Mr. Chelsea," she said, in tears. "Please read it for me."

Slowly and distinctly Jerome read every sentence. "This strange man came to me at the cottage one night, wearing a red wig," he continued nervously.

"A red wig?" interrupted Sister Benita. "I can now recall this very article. I remember finding it on Arthur's table next morning. He told me it belonged to one of the actors at the Olympic."

He then read of Mad Nance's entrance into the Lescot cottage, her stealing the child and carrying it to the bend of the river, where Gravenor met her and administered chloroform.

Sister Benita raised her eyes and said: "I remember distinctly Arthur's entrance into the boat the evening we left the island. He carried the little child in his arms. He told me he had adopted it and was going to take it back to Kempton with him. I thought nothing of the matter at the time, as my brother was a man of moods, and I felt that it was better to satisfy his whims. Arthur had been acting strangely for weeks. I also remember smelling chloroform on the little one the

night he brought it to us on the steamer. I drew his attention to the fact, but he replied that the child had had a cold and a strong-smelling liniment had been rubbed on its chest. God forgive him! He could not have known what he was doing."

When Jerome had finished reading the document he asked: "Then, Sister, do you really think that this stolen child was no other than Gracia?"

"I am sure of it. It cannot be otherwise. I carried her all the way from the Place o' Pines seventeen years ago, and have watched her grow into womanhood. Gracia! Gracia!" she said sadly. "At last the shadows brighten. We always called you 'nobody's child,' but now we know that one mother's heart was broken when you were taken away."

"But listen," interposed Jerome. "Mad Nance in her confession calls the child Constance, and you call the same child Gracia. This seems very strange indeed."

"Not at all. I am sure Arthur changed the child's name purposely. And Mazie Lescot, the child's mother, is dead," murmured the grief-stricken nun. "Poor thing! her end was tragic. I wonder what has become of the other child."

"I did not hear."

Instantly Sister Benita's thoughts stole to

the mysterious letter which her brother had entrusted to her on his deathbed.

"Do you know, Mr. Chelsea, now that you have exchanged confidences with me, I will confide in you. I have in my possession a letter addressed to Gracia. My brother handed it to me on his deathbed and begged me to read it to her on her twentieth birthday. I have often wondered what the contents are; but only a few more days and then we will know all. On the evening of Gracia's birthday, the night previous to the wedding, I will have the letter opened and read."

"Does Gracia know anything of this?"

"Not a word. Have you told her of Mad Nance's confession?"

"I have not, Sister. I thought it best not to tell her. It would only tend to sadden her life."

"I am going to ask a favor of you, Mr. Chelsea. Will you let me take charge of this document for the present? The Cardinal will be here this afternoon, and I would like to tell him all about these sudden, startling developments. He has always been the intimate friend of the family."

"Certainly, Sister. You are quite welcome to it."

When Jerome rose to go, Sister Benita said: "Now, do not worry, Mr. Chelsea. Brighter days are yet in store for you."

"I shall not worry. I am easier, now that I have told you all. It feels good to know that Gracia lives in total ignorance of the terrible truth."

That afternoon Sister Benita and the Cardinal had a quiet chat lasting an hour. The nun had felt terribly upset. The news of her brother's implication in the crime had bruised her sensitive conscience.

"You must not worry, child, over Arthur's misdeeds." The Cardinal spoke kindly. "You know as well as I that in his state of mind he was hardly responsible. Besides, he has atoned for it. Look what a fine girl Gracia is to-day, full of hope and ambition, and all through the most earnest watchfulness and care. So dry your tears, child! I shall call at Bleur House and relieve you of the trying ordeal of reading your brother's mysterious letter to Gracia."

"Thanks, your Eminence, you are exceedingly kind," Sister Benita said, drying her tears.

CHAPTER XXX.

Old Letters.

"Every day brings a ship,
Every ship brings a word;
Well for those who have no fear,
Looking seaward well assured,
That the word the vessel brings
Is the word they wish to hear."

—*Emerson.*

THE night of Gracia's birthday arrived. All day long preparations had been in progress for the wedding on the morrow. Gracia was the embodiment of loveliness and happiness as she went flitting from room to room in her plain white gown, on some errand of usefulness. A large red rose glowed in her hair and another on her breast.

Matt Pensy, decked in his Sunday best, was a very conspicuous figure about Bleur House.

"I am sorry to see Gracia go," he said to Sister Benita, as the latter was admiring the floral decorations in the dining-room. "The place will be empty without her. She was life itself—music an' song all the blessed day. Jerome Chelsea has much to be thankful for. Gracia is no' one o' them wallflowers that a breath of wind will blow away. And she's no' mad with the society craze either an' the

pink-tea notions an' suchlike. Thank heaven for that! She can paint an' sing an' play an' work with the best o' them. But Aunt Hawkins an' I will be very lonely in this large house when she is gone."

A tear trickled down the old man's cheek, and a look of sadness came into his eyes.

"Ah, no," answered Sister Benita. "You shall not be left alone here. Listen! Gracia is not going to leave Bleur House. This will be her home. Besides, another member will be added to your household to-morrow."

"Oh, I am so glad the young people are no' goin' to leave us. With Jerome here it will be livelier than ever. He's a fine man, Jerome is—a regular, all-roun' gentleman. He brought me this vest all the way from the Place o' Pines, an' I think it was kind o' decent o' him."

"By the way, Matt, do you know what time of day it is?" asked the nun, drifting into another theme.

Matt's fingers stole to his watch.

"It's exactly eight," he replied.

Just then the door-bell sounded.

"I am sure it is the Cardinal."

"The Cardinal?" said Matt, doubtfully. "Well, well! I think I had better go, then."

"You must not be afraid of His Eminence. He is only a plain, humble old man."

Presently Aunt Hawkins came over on her

crutches—rheumatism had almost made her a cripple—and whispered to Sister Benita: "The Cardinal is waiting in the drawing-room, dear."

"Pardon me, Matt. His Eminence is waiting."

The Cardinal greeted Sister Benita warmly.

"Have you brought the little box containing the letter?" he asked of her, kindly.

"Yes, your Eminence. Here it is," she said, "just as my brother gave it to me; and here is the key."

"I suppose it will fit the lock."

"I hope so. I have never tried it."

"Then this letter has never left the casket since your brother placed it there."

"No, your Eminence."

In a moment the key turned in the lock and the lid flew open.

"Ah, here is the precious envelope!" exclaimed the Cardinal. "It does seem strange, Sister, that Arthur should have addressed it to Gracia and commanded you to read it to her on her twentieth birthday. When had I best read the letter?"

"After a little while, your Eminence. I think dinner will be ready shortly. Ah, yes, there is the bell."

The two left the room, Sister Benita leading the way. In the hall the Cardinal met Gracia and Jerome.

At dinner a feeling of rare good cheer prevailed. The Cardinal was in his element, and his fine witty sayings kept everyone in good humor. Poor Matt Pensy laughed so heartily that he could scarcely perform his duties at the table. Aunt Hawkins confessed that she had not heard such genuine laughter for many a day. Sister Benita tried hard to throw a cloak over her feelings, and succeeded. She could not help thinking of her dead brother. How she wished that he might suddenly come to life and explain in person all the strange mystery! Her thoughts stole to Mad Nance and her startling confession, and she grew faint. Jerome, with Gracia at his side, felt that he was the richest man in all the world. He chatted briskly and his face beamed with smiles. To-morrow was to bring him the realization of all his fondest hopes; to-morrow he was to take Gracia to himself as wife. How his heart longed for the hour in which he could call her his forever! For weeks he had waited for the day. He had something to live for after all, something beautiful and precious that no one would ever dare to take from him.

After dinner all withdrew to the drawing-room. When they were comfortably seated, the Cardinal rose from his chair somewhat nervously, and motioned Sister Benita to his side. The nun obeyed. His Eminence whis-

pered something and she hurriedly left the room. Gracia wondered what all the strange proceedings could mean. She leaned over to Jerome and remarked, somewhat inquisitively, "I wonder what the Cardinal is going to do. He seems very nervous—poor old man! See how his fingers tremble. He will never adjust his glasses. What do you think he is going to do, Jerome?"

"Probably speak a few words of advice and encouragement to us," Jerome replied, purposely concealing the real motive of the Cardinal's visit.

"But why did Sister Benita leave the room so hurriedly? Besides, she looked dreadfully pale. Oh, there she comes, carrying something in her hands."

Sister Benita entered with the little casket in her hands. Nervously she placed it on the table and resumed her seat directly opposite Gracia. The Cardinal's eyes surveyed the room. They rested pityingly for a moment on Gracia. Then he began, notwithstanding his years, in a firm, clear voice:

"My dear children, on the eve of your intended marriage, let me speak a few words to you. I am glad to be with you this evening, and I congratulate most heartily the young lady whose birthday is being so fittingly celebrated. I hope and trust that the young man to whom she has given her love will

honor it as the most sacred gift that life can give him, that he will remain true to his promises, and that God will bless both with an abundance of graces which make for perfection in this life and the next. I have another matter to refer to, and no time seems more opportune than the present. Sister Benita has handed me this casket which I hold in my hand. It was entrusted to her by her brother on his deathbed. When Arthur Gravenor was dying he commissioned her to open the casket and read the enclosed letter to you, Gracia, on your twentieth birthday. That day has now arrived, and to-night your benefactor's desire will be fulfilled, here in the presence of your friends. May God grant that it will bring into your life added happiness!"

Gracia stirred in her chair somewhat frightened. Her cheeks were pale.

"Poor girl!" thought Jerome, noticing her evident uneasiness. "I should have told her beforehand of this."

"See," His Eminence exclaimed, "the letter is addressed thus:

"'*To* MISS GRACIA GRAVENOR,
To be opened on her twentieth birthday.'"

Gracia's heart throbbed visibly, her eyes

fastened on the Cardinal's wrinkled, noble face.

Slowly the Cardinal opened the envelope, and read in trembling voice:

"*Dear Gracia,*—On this, your twentieth birthday, Arthur Gravenor's voice speaks to you from the grave. It has a crime to confess. Undoubtedly, dear child, you have been wondering who your parents were, what became of them, and how you drifted into the Gravenor household. I knew your parents well. They both lived in Kempton at one time. Your mother, Mazie Rawlins, was the only girl I ever loved, and when she married Lawrence Lescot—your father—my heart was torn in two. My soul ached for revenge, and when five years later, in company with my sister Muriel, I visited the Place o' Pines, I again met your mother. She was a widow then, your father having been drowned at sea. Again I asked her to marry me. She refused, and again I swore that I would make her suffer. But it was madness and jealousy that drove me to it. In a far from sane state of mind I visited a low character, Mad Nance by name—"

Sister Benita lowered her eyes. Her face grew ashen white. By this time Gracia had risen to her feet, looking into the Cardinal's

kindly face and waiting breathlessly for every word. Jerome stood at her side manfully, his face filled with an expression of pity that was touching.

"I visited a low character, Mad Nance by name," the Cardinal repeated, "paid her a sum of money and ordered her to go to Mazie Lescot's house and steal her little daughter, who was about three years old. That very night I left the Place o' Pines and carried the stolen child to Kempton with me. Gracia—forgive me! That child was you. Your real name was Constance. For various reasons I thought it best to change it."

Gracia's head dropped into Jerome's strong arms. The surprise had been too much for her, and her heart was heavy with anguish. The Cardinal paused thoughtfully a few moments, and, noticing that Gracia had recovered, he continued reading:

"When I returned to Kempton I recognized the gravity of the crime I had committed. My remorse of conscience was great. I sought to restore you to your mother, but it was too late. You were supposed to have been the victim of foul play. Your mother worried so that she died a day or two after the crime was committed."

As the story proceeded there was not a dry

eye in the room. Gracia wept bitterly. It was the first time her heart had ever felt the pang of real suffering. Even the old Cardinal brushed aside a few sudden tears.

"I am sorry, my dear children," he said, "that the letter so far has not contained a cheery word."

Then straightening himself, he continued reading: "You had an only brother, Gracia. His name was Jerome. After your mother's death I inquired about him. I thought of bringing him to Kempton to spend his days with you, but learned from a friend in England that he had been adopted by a certain wealthy Sidney Chelsea, a retired widower, living at 15 Marlton House Terrace, London."

"15 Marlton House Terrace!" shrieked Jerome, his face reddening with surprise, "the very place where I spent my boyhood days. Sidney Chelsea was my adopted father. Great heavens!"

A thousand thoughts pierced Jerome's mind. The room swam before his eyes. Then Gracia's voice roused him from his sudden stupor.

"Finish the letter, your Eminence, please," gasped Jerome, almost wildly.

The Cardinal continued. The letter was unearthing strange developments, and loud and clear came the old man's touching voice:

"Upon receiving the news of Jerome's adoption, I wired Sir Sidney Chelsea, and in time received a reply that the report was true. He had adopted Jerome Lescot, changing his name to Chelsea."

"Great God!" Jerome sobbed. "Then we are sister and brother!"

The news was too much for Gracia. She reeled and staggered and would have fallen to the ground, but Jerome held her fast.

"Poor child!" the Cardinal whispered to himself, his voice overcome with emotion. "Poor child of destiny!"

After some minutes Gracia regained consciousness. "Have I been dreaming?" she moaned, looking into Jerome's honest face. "Is it true that we are sister and brother?"

"Yes, dear," he replied in trembling voice. "It is only too true."

"But what a blessing, my dear children," cheeringly spoke the Cardinal, "that you should have discovered the truth in time."

"It is better so," said Jerome. "I am glad this evening has brought an unexpected treasure into my life. If Love has not found a wife for me, thank God she has found my long-lost sister!"

Turning, he embraced Gracia and kissed her. For some minutes the two wept tears of gladness.

Sister Benita came across the room and

tearfully whispered something into their ears. "I am glad for both of you," was all she could say. Then she left the room. Aunt Hawkins followed her. In the mind of the latter a new light had suddenly dawned.

Gracia and Jerome had accepted the strange decree of fate with strong and courageous hearts.

Matt Pensy, overcome with emotion, could not help shaking hands with them, saying: "It does me old heart good to know that you ha' found each other after havin' been parted these many years."

Presently the Cardinal rose.

"I believe, my dear children," he said smilingly, "that I did not finish the reading of the letter which has brought such a sudden change into your hopeful young lives. I might therefore add that the deceased Arthur Gravenor has proven himself a noble benefactor to you both by willing each one hundred thousand dollars. So you see the unfortunate man has made amends, and I hope, dear children, you will not withhold your forgiveness."

Sister Benita sat in the library, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"You must not weep so, dear," Aunt Hawkins said, entering the room. Only a few days ago the latter had found a sealed envelope in the vault, bearing the Place o' Pines

postmark. The date showed that it must have lain there for years. The strange happenings of but a few moments ago had at once drawn her thoughts to the letter.

" Sister, look at this letter, please," she said nervously. " I found it in the vault the other day."

Sister Benita raised her eyes excitedly. " Let me see, auntie. It bears the Place o' Pines postmark. I must examine it closely. It was posted the year after Arthur and I visited the island. I cannot think. My senses reel. I believe, auntie," she said, some minutes later, " that I had this very letter in my hands years ago. It arrived after Arthur's death, I remember. I had not the heart to open it then and read it. Where did you find it?"

" In Arthur's old letter box."

" Just where I placed it years ago. I wonder whose letter it was!"

" Read it, dear! It seems providential that I should have thought of it now."

Sister Benita opened the envelope. Her eyes took on a joyful look as she read the contents.

" There is news here, auntie," she cried with joy. " Come, let us hurry to the drawing-room!"

" Please, your Eminence—read this letter," Sister Benita cried excitedly, as she ap-

proached the Cardinal. "Aunt Hawkins has unearthed a golden jewel!"

There was consternation written on Gracia and Jerome's faces. It had been a busy time of surprises and they hardly knew what to expect now. Sister Benita was experiencing one of the greatest joys in life.

The Cardinal's eyes scanned the strange letter. A smile stole to his face, and he read, in tones of gladness:

"The Place o' Pines,
August 13, 18—

"*Dear Mr. Gravenor,*—Months have passed since the arrival of your letter of inquiry concerning Mrs. Lescot's other child —Jerome. A severe siege of illness has prevented my writing you until now. It would have been very good of you to have taken charge of Constance's brother, but I am afraid the plan is not practicable. Immediately after Mrs. Lescot's death the boy was taken to England by one Sidney Chelsea, who was holidaying at the Place o' Pines at the time of the tragedy. Since then I have never seen or heard of the boy.

"You will no doubt be surprised to learn that Jerome is only a brother by adoption to Constance. When Lawrence Lescot commanded the *El Dorado,* a woman, who was a stranger to everyone on board, died rather

suddenly. On her deathbed she begged the captain to adopt her little orphaned son. Lawrence did so. The child, Jerome, lived with the Lescots two years before Constance was born.

"Very few about the Place o' Pines ever heard the story. I happened to be a passenger on the steamer when the woman died.

"NANCE DROWLER."

"This letter explains itself," the Cardinal continued. "To-morrow's wedding-bells will be merry ones indeed."

Jerome drew Gracia to his breast and implanted upon her lips a tender kiss.

"God has been kind, and love is all the sweeter now," he said gladly, his eyes gazing into the heart of the golden future.

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